



Rural Development Networks

A Mapping Exercise

Policy Summary

Martine Miller and Jennifer Wallace



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Summary and overview



Summary

Overview of findings

In June 2011, The Carnegie UK Trust conducted a scoping exercise that sought to map rural community development networks throughout the UK and Ireland. In carrying out this piece of research, the Trust wished to find out about existing networks across the UK and Ireland. The research sought to identify why rural networks exist, their benefits to users and the key issues facing them, particularly in the current climate of public spending cuts.

- Rural development networks play an important role in building community capacity. Over the past 10 years, technology has enabled rural development networks to extend their reach and improve communications with users.
- Our research identified a surprising 232 networks – all of whom had an online presence. Online technology has reduced the start-up costs, as well as the costs of running networks, as individuals move from face-to-face contact to social media.
- While this is welcome, it has led to the proliferation of networks which has resulted in a complex and confusing landscape for users. Our research found a large number of these networks with differing remits and resources. Concerns were raised over efficiency and duplication of effort. At the same time, funding was highly variable, insecure and in favour of start-ups rather than continuing networks. There were considerable concerns raised about the sustainability of existing networks.

- Users favoured local and national networks as these were viewed as providing the most relevant information, particularly around funding. Cross-national networks, while useful, were less likely to be identified by users. This may be because users are less likely to access cross-national networks for up-to-date information on funding and policy developments within each jurisdiction.
- This paper provides a summary of the research findings and sets out a series of recommendations designed to address the future sustainability of rural development networks.
- Carnegie UK Trust is calling on governments across the UK and Ireland to provide leadership to the sector and engage in a debate over the efficiency and effectiveness of the sector.



Recommendations

The Carnegie UK Trust therefore make the following recommendations:

That rural community development networks in each jurisdiction:

- Meet to explore how they can best represent the voices and interests of their users in policy debates.
- Share experiences of partnership working and consider further how they can work together to increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of their networks. This may include merging networks.

That governments within the UK and Government of Ireland:

- Call together a summit of identified rural networks to discuss the future of rural development networks and opportunities for partnership working, thus enabling the sector to improve its efficiency and effectiveness.
- Carry out a mapping exercise within their jurisdiction to enable joined-up working by identifying all potential local and national network partners. This mapping should be made available to the sector and members of the public to enable them to identify sources of information and advice.
- Create a short-life forum for key civil servants from across the nations to debate and discuss issues relating to the sector and share learning and experience from rural development networks across the jurisdictions.

Key findings



Key findings

What are Rural Development Networks?

Rural development networks are organisations that exist in order to improve the wellbeing, capacity and resilience of rural communities. A large number of networks are in existence across the UK and Ireland and each vary in terms of their core remit (ie specific rural focus, specialist areas of expertise or non-specific remit), the nature of the work that they engage in (ie practical advice, support and lobbying functions) and the nature of their members (ie individuals and communities, practitioners and professional bodies or organisations). Networks also tend to vary in terms of their geographical reach and many of them rely upon public funding and/or grants, which cover operational costs and networking functions.

The research showed that for the most part, no substantial differences were found in terms of the reasons why survey participants chose to access local, national or cross/international networks (see Figure 1).

While networks possessed key differences in terms of their core remit and resources, users tended to access networks for the same key reasons. The most commonly reported reasons for accessing networks were:

- To receive advice and information
- To share local learning and experiences
- To develop creative ways to solve local problems and needs
- To identify sources of funding

Figure 1 – Reason for accessing networks

These information functions are the key shared characteristic of the networks identified and are arguably the core purpose of such networks.

What are the benefits of Rural Development Networks?

The research shows that involvement in rural development networks has a number of benefits. Individual involvement with them provided users with a feeling of confidence when tackling a range of issues within their community. Figure 2 shows that survey participants felt extremely or quite confident in their ability to:

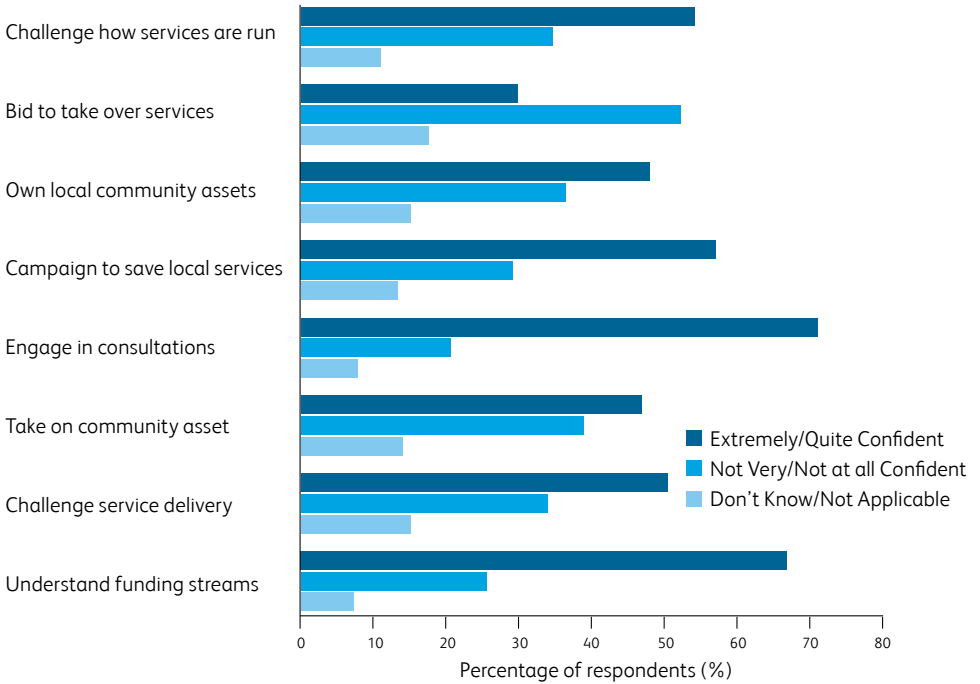
- Engage in consultations (71%, n=117)
- Identify sources of funding (67%, n=110)
- Campaign to save local services (57%, n=94)

However, survey participants were least confident in their ability to:

- Negotiate with landowners to take over ownership of community assets (39%, n=64)
- Own local assets (37%, n=60)
- Bid to take over the delivery of services (52%, n=86)

While the research shows that survey respondents were confident in their ability to engage in consultations, identify funding and campaign to save local services, they were least confident when thinking about the ownership of community assets. This finding is particularly relevant in a climate where communities across all jurisdictions are increasingly under pressure to take on a greater role in the ownership of community assets and suggests that this may be one area that networks could support their members.

Figure 2 – Confidence in tackling rural issues as a result of involvement in rural networks



What is the landscape of Rural Development Networks at present?

The research identified a total of 232 rural networks from the responses of survey participants. While the networks identified do not present a full picture of networks currently in existence across the UK and Ireland, they do provide a snapshot of the landscape of networks used by survey participants. Using information accessed from each network's website, coupled with information gathered from the survey and telephone interviews, The Carnegie UK Trust have developed a geographical typology of networks that is characterised both by the operational reach and governance of networks across the UK and Ireland (see Table 1).

Of the 232 networks identified, 85 operated at a local level local, 121 had a national remit and 26 worked across jurisdictions or operated at an international level.

Networks were also found to be distinct in terms of their governance. The research shows that a large proportion of networks were non-government organisations (NGOs) (80%, n=186) while one in seven (14%, n=32) were delivered directly by government or solely government funded. A small proportion of organisations identified were academic institutes and private sector organisations (8%, n=19). For the purpose of the study, these organisations were categories as 'other'.

The research shows that networks were split between those that had a specific rural focus (44%, n=103) and those that operated worked on issued affecting both urban and rural communities (56%, n=129).

In terms of membership, the median membership was 300, with some very large generic networks, but the vast majority operating with under 500

Table 1 – Typology of networks

Typology of Networks	Non-government Organisations (NGOs) ¹	Government Organisations ²	Other ³	Total
Local Networks – networks that work directly with individuals and community groups within a small geographical area	70	13	2	85
National Networks – networks that operate at a national level ⁴	93	16	12	121
Cross/International national – national networks that transcend jurisdictional boundaries or operate at an international level	18	3	5	26
Total	186	32	19	232

1 By 'NGO' we mean voluntary sector, charity and other not-for-profit organisations

2 By 'Government Organisations' we mean local community projects/group and national networks that are delivered by governments or solely funded by government bodies

3 By 'Other' we mean academic institutes and private sector organisations

4 These were organisations who both worked directly with communities and were umbrella organisations

membership. Most were run on a membership basis, with a roughly even split between those charging a fee and those that were free to join. In terms of staffing, the majority operate with between one and 20 staff. Around a quarter of generic network organisations have over 20 members of staff. Two rural networks operate with no staff at all.

What are the issues facing Rural Development Networks?

- 1. Funding** - Evidence from the interviews with rural development network leaders suggests that the knock-on effect of funding cuts across the UK and Ireland are being felt in terms of the reduction in the number of paid members of staff, and in terms of organisations' abilities to continue to deliver services.
- 2. Engagement with users** - Rural development networks' key aim is to engage with communities and to encourage dialogue. One of the main issues facing them is identifying creative ways to engage with communities and individuals. The research found that networks are increasingly utilising online communication tools such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Networks are also beginning to think creatively about the format of their websites as well as the volume of information they provide their members with. Concerns were raised in relation to the shift to online networking in terms of digital uptake and broadband coverage however, as rural development networks embrace the digital era, governments should include them in strategies to encourage online participation among the communities they represent.

3. Representation and visibility - The research highlighted that those who were actively involved with the delivery of services were least confident in their organisations' ability to influence national rural policy. Rural development networks should be encouraged and supported to represent the voices and interests of those communities they represent.

4. Prominence of rural issues - The study found considerable levels of concern in relation to the perceived distinction

between made rural community development and agricultural and environmental rural development among policy makers. This distinction was felt to have profound implications for the future direction of networks. For instance, the focus upon agriculture and economic development has resulted in a climate of uncertainty among both network leaders and survey respondents. Governments could alleviate concerns by ensuring that funding streams for rural community development are clear and transparent.



5. Facilitation and

moderation - The research found that participants were least confident in their ability to take over the ownership of community assets or the delivery of local services (see Figure 2). The report suggests that individuals and communities would benefit from professional mentoring and facilitation to increase the confidence and capacity of communities to take on a greater role in their local area. Governments should consider the support that is currently offered to communities to take on local assets and the delivery of services.

6. Partnership working -

The study found that rural development networks were keen to engage in joined-up working with partner organisations. There was the view that partnership working could enable organisations to

pool their resources and, in turn, improve the services they currently offer their members. Partnership working was also felt to be a way for organisations to work collaboratively to both share learning and reduce duplication of effort. Our research suggests that rural development networks would benefit from the leadership of those organisations who have successfully linked with others. These rural networks could demonstrate how they partnered with other organisations and, in turn, share their learning and experiences with others who wish to work collaboratively. The research found that some networks are already engaged in some forms of partnership working. Rural development networks should consider how to share learning and develop partnership projects.

Discussion



Discussion

Rural development networks play an important role in building community capacity. However, within the current climate of austerity and public spending cuts across the UK and Ireland, rural development networks and the communities they represent are presented with a challenging future.

Over the past 10 years, technology has enabled rural development networks to extend their reach and improve communications with users. It has reduced the start-up costs as well as the costs of running networks as individuals move from face-to-face contact to social media. While supportive of this shift, network providers were cautious to move entirely to online networking due to concerns over digital exclusion.

The development of technology to enable online networking has led to the proliferation of networks, resulting in a complex and confusing landscape for users. Our research found a large number of these networks with differing remits and resources. Concerns were raised by users and providers over efficiency and duplication of effort. There were calls for networks to develop stronger links and work in partnership with networks that have a common purpose.

Funding for networks is highly variable, insecure and favours start-ups rather than continuing networks. There were considerable concerns raised about the sustainability of existing networks, both NGO and government-funded.

The Carnegie UK Trust believes there are measures that can be adopted to ensure the future sustainability of networks and to improve the services they deliver. Governments across the UK and Ireland have an interest in networks as providers, funders and enablers. Given the diversity identified, The Carnegie UK Trust therefore recommends that governments provide leadership to the sector to ensure is sustainability.

At the same time, we believe that rural development networks can take further action to improve partnership working. The research found examples of partnerships being developed, but we believe that much more could be achieved by rural development networks coming together to deliver shared outcomes.



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- Create a short-life forum for key civil servants from across the nations to debate and discuss issues relating to the sector and share learning and experience from rural development networks across the jurisdictions.

The research is based on 15 qualitative interviews with leaders of rural networks and the responses of 218 online survey participants. Members of Fiery Spirits, the Carnegie UK Trust's Community of Practice (CoP), were sent a link to the online survey and, upon completion, were encouraged to forward the survey web link to their personal and professional contacts. The survey identified a list of 232 networks and, from this list, the research team carried out further desk-based research in order to create a typology of organisations that survey participants said they accessed.

The full report is available from the Carnegie UK Trust's website: www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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