



Rural Development Networks

A Mapping Exercise

Martine Miller and Jennifer Wallace



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Report structure

The structure of this report is as follows:

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Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study and initial outline of the fieldwork, research methodology and demographic profile of study participants. In-depth details of the methods employed, demographic profile of study participants, survey questionnaire and topic guide for the telephone interviews can be found in Appendix 1-4.

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Chapter 2 presents a typology of networks identified from the responses of survey participants. The chapter illustrates networks by their geographical reach of networks, membership size, membership type (ie open membership, fee and free but with membership), number of staff and remit.

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Chapter 3 presents rural development network leaders' definitions of rural development networks and explores online survey respondents' reasons for accessing them. The chapter also outlines the information needs of rural development network users.

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Chapter 4 considers the benefits of user involvement in rural development networks in terms of levels of confidence and ability to address rural community issues.

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Chapter 5 describes network leaders' and online survey respondents' views on how rural networks can improve the services they offer rural communities.

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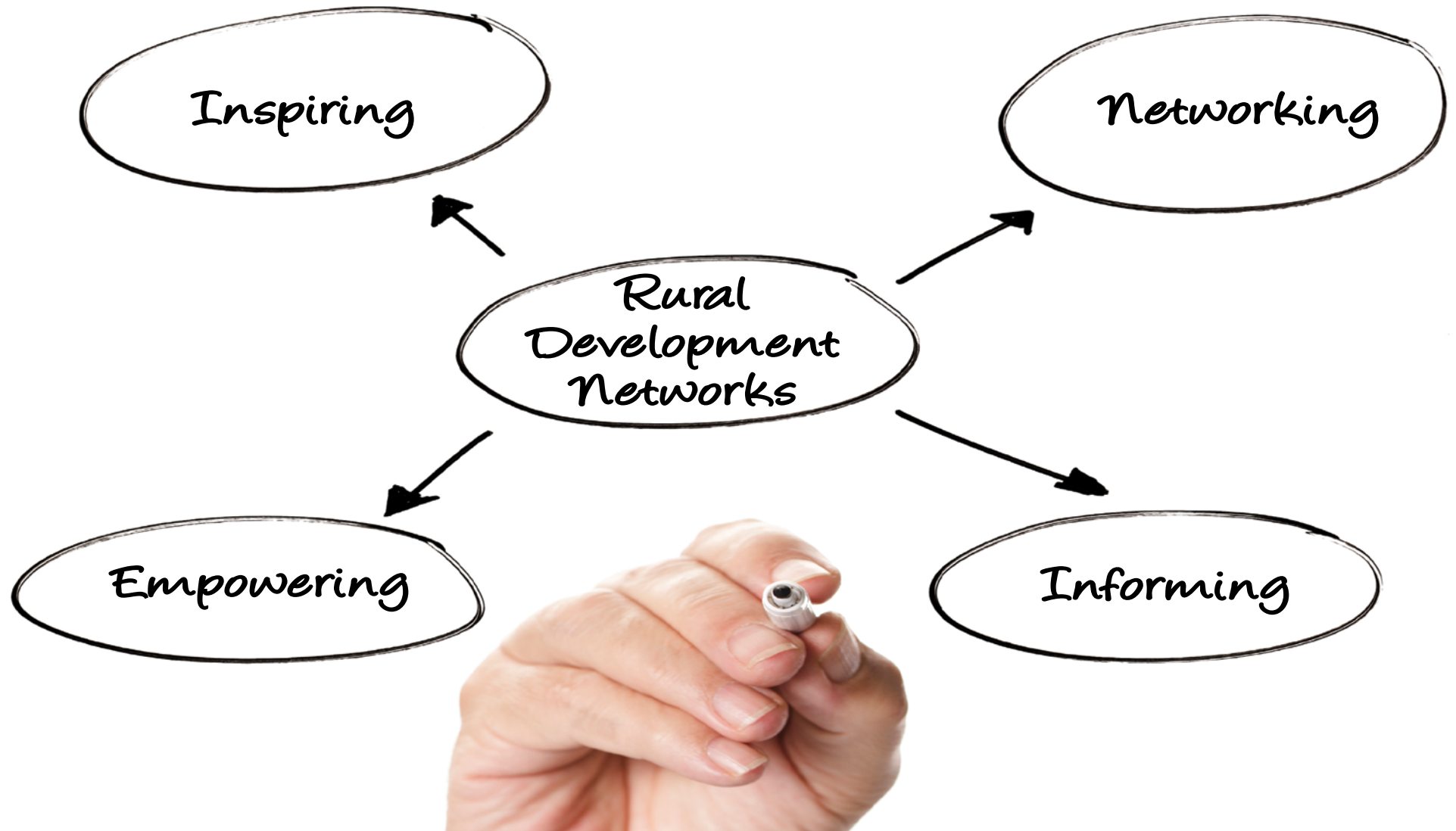
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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

This section summarises the key findings from the scoping exercise to map rural development networks across the UK and Ireland. In carrying out this piece of research, the Carnegie UK Trust aimed to identify existing networks whilst also exploring why rural networks exist, their benefits to users and the key issues facing networks, particularly in the current climate of public spending cuts.

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods and collected data from a range of individuals and organisations. Telephone interviews were conducted with 15 leaders of rural development networks and an online survey was sent to members of Fiery Spirits, the Carnegie UK Trust's Community of Practice (CoP). Upon completion of the online survey, participants were encouraged to forward the survey web link to their personal and professional contacts. A response of 218 online survey participants was obtained. The survey identified 232 networks and, from this list, the research team carried out further desk-based research in order to create a typology of the organisations that survey participants said they accessed.

What are rural development networks?

Rural development networks generally exist to improve the wellbeing, capacity and resilience of rural communities. A vast number of networks are in existence across the UK and Ireland and vary in terms of their core remit, the nature of the work that they engage in and the nature of their members, ie individuals, grassroots community groups and practitioners. Networks also tend to vary in terms of their lobbying function and their geographical reach.

Many rural development networks rely on public funding and/or grants, which cover operational costs and networking functions. Within the current climate of austerity and public spending cuts across the UK and Ireland, rural development networks and the communities they serve are presented with a challenging future, particularly in terms of network sustainability and the delivery of services.

What is the landscape of rural development networks?

From the list of 232 networks identified by study participants, our research categorised networks into a geographical typology that consisted of:

- Local networks
- National networks
- Cross/international networks

While networks were classified in terms of their geographical remit, our research also found that networks were distinct in terms of their governance. A large proportion of networks identified were non-government organisations (NGOs) (80%, n=186) while one in seven (14%, n=32) were delivered directly by government or were solely government funded. A small proportion of organisations identified were academic institutes and private sector organisations (8%, n=19). From the list of networks identified, a greater proportion addressed both urban and rural issues (56%, n=129) than those solely operating within a rural context (44%, n=103).

Why do users access rural development networks?

The research showed that for the most part, no substantial differences were found in terms of the reasons why survey participants chose to access networks by type. In addition, despite differences in terms of core remit and resources, users reported accessing 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

Our research found that survey participants were more likely to report that they use or are aware of local or national networks. This may be because local and national networks are more likely to provide up-to-date information on funding and policy developments within each jurisdiction, or they may have a more visible profile than cross/international networks.

Benefits of accessing rural development networks

There were a number of benefits for using rural development networks. The research found that involvement with rural networks provided users with a feeling of confidence when tackling a range of issues within their community. For instance, survey respondents were confident in their ability to engage in consultations, identify funding and campaign to save local services. However, they were least confident when thinking about the ownership of community assets.

What are the issues facing rural development networks?

From discussions with network leaders, the research found six key 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 rural development networks 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 rural development networks 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 to represent the voices and interests of their communities.

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. 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 – 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.

Conclusion

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. Online technologies have reduced 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.

Our research found that there is a proliferation of networks which has resulted in a complex and confusing landscape for users. A large number of these networks have differing remits and resources and concerns were raised, both by users and providers in terms of 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.

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

Our findings outline a number of emerging issues for the future sustainability and direction of rural development networks across the UK and Ireland.

Recommendations

The Carnegie UK Trust therefore set out 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.

Chapter 1

Introduction



1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Rural development networks generally exist to improve the wellbeing, capacity and resilience of rural communities. A vast number of networks are in existence across the UK and Ireland and each vary in terms of their core remit, the nature of the work that they engage in and the nature of their members, ie individuals, grassroots community groups and practitioners. Networks also tend to vary in terms of their lobbying function and their geographical reach.

Many rural development networks rely on public funding and/or grants, which cover operational costs and networking functions. Within the current climate of austerity and public spending cuts across the UK and Ireland, rural development networks and the communities they serve are presented with a challenging future, particularly in terms of network sustainability and the delivery of services.

Against this backdrop, the current study seeks to explore networks that currently exist and present the reasons why individuals chose to access them. The study also aims to provide a snapshot of the key issues that rural development networks are currently experiencing.

1.2 About this report

This report presents results from a study conducted by the Carnegie UK Trust that sought to map rural development networks across the UK and Ireland. This report focuses on data collected and analysed during the months of June to October 2011 and includes:

- Findings from 218 online survey respondents. Data was collected over a four-week period 29th June – 27th July 2011
- Findings from telephone interviews conducted with 15 rural development network leaders, interviewed between 19th July – 16th August 2011
- Desk-based research of 232 organisations identified in the online survey to create a typology of rural development networks

While the panel interviews allow us to explore key issues facing rural development networks in detail, the survey provides information from a wider range of participants involved in rural community development. In addition to the primary research outlined above, desk based research was carried out to obtain additional information about the networks identified in the responses of survey participants.

1.3 Methodology

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods and collected data from a range of individuals and organisations in order to explore the role of rural development networks, the functions they perform and the key issues that networks, individuals and communities face as a result of the changing landscape of local and national rural development policy. The methods employed are described in more detail in Appendix 1, while the questionnaire and interview topic guide are provided in Appendices 2 and 3. In summary, the study includes:

Research with individuals with an interest in and/or working in the field of rural development

- An online survey of sent to members of Fiery Spirits¹, the Carnegie UK Trust Community of Practice (CoP).
- Upon completion, survey participants were encouraged to forward the survey web link to their personal and professional contacts.
- The survey attracted 218 responses.

¹ www.fieryspirits.com

Research with leaders of rural development networks

- National rural development networks were specifically selected to be included in the qualitative phase of our study.
- Telephone interviews were conducted with 15 leaders (chief executives, directors and project managers) of rural development networks across the UK and Ireland.

Secondary analysis of rural development networks' websites

- Using data gathered from the responses of online survey participants, 232 rural development networks were identified
- Desk-based research was undertaken in order to obtain additional information on this list of networks. This phase of research involved gathering publicly available information from networks' websites such as remit, geographical reach, membership and staffing size.

1.4 Demographics of telephone and survey respondents

Telephone interview respondents

Telephone interviews conducted with 15 leaders of national rural development networks were comprised as follows:

- six organisations that worked directly with individuals and community groups
- five umbrella networks, which have been defined as networks of networks
- four government-funded networks

Further detail on the profile of rural development networks included in the telephone interview phase of our study can be found in Appendix 4.

Survey respondents

The online survey received 218 survey responses, of which three in 10 (30%, n=66) reported that they were users of a rural development network. Around two fifths (37%, n=80) indicated that they were involved in the day-to-day running of a network² and a third (33%, n=72) reported that they were both users of networks and

involved with the day-to-day running of a network.

For the remainder of this report, those who indicated that they were involved with the running of a network, and both users of networks and involved with the day-to-day running of networks have been combined for analysis purposes and will be referred to as 'producers'³ for the remainder of the report (Table 1).

The demographic profile of both telephone and survey respondents are described in more detail in Appendix 5.

Table 1 Sample composition

	N	%
User of a network	66	30
Producers	152	70
<i>Base</i>	<i>218</i>	<i>100</i>

² For the purpose of this report, someone who is involved with the day-to-day running of a network is defined as a volunteer, paid member of staff, those involved with key decision making, or trustee.

³ Producers are defined as those respondents who indicated that they were both a user and involved with the running of a network.

Chapter 2

Typology of Rural Networks



2 Typology of Rural Networks

Chapter Summary

The research identified 232 networks used by those interested in rural issues. These were categorised into a geographical typology:

- Local networks
- National networks
- Cross/International networks

Rural development networks' remits were:

- Largely specific to rural issues, though some report using generic networks for information and advice that they find useful in a rural context
- Mostly local or national networks, with few working on a cross-jurisdictional basis

In terms of membership:

- The median membership was 300, with some very large generic networks, but the vast majority were operating with under 500 members.
- Mostly 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 staff members. Two operate with no staff at all.

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the typology of rural networks. It is based on information accessed from the websites of the 232 networks that were identified through the responses of survey participants (Appendix 6). As website information is partial, we do not have information on each element of the typology for every network. The mapping of the rural networks was also carried out using a snowballing approach for survey recipients. Therefore, while we are sure that the networks identified represent a large proportion of rural networks currently in existence, it should only be considered as a partial snapshot of the sector.

2.2 Typology

A geographical typology emerged from the rural development networks that were identified in the responses of survey participants (Table 2). Rural networks were found to operate across a variety of geographical regions, for example, locally-based networks, national networks, and networks that transcended both national and international regions. In addition to geographic remit, differences in terms of the organisational governance were observed. For example, networks identified were categorised into ‘non-governmental’ organisations, ‘government-funded’ organisations or ‘other’, ie academic

Table 2 – Typology of networks

Typology of Networks	Non-government Organisations (NGOs) ⁴	Government Organisations ⁵	Other ⁶	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 (these are split into Direct and Umbrella organisations)	93	16	12	121
Direct – networks that work directly with individuals and community groups	82	16	12	-
Umbrella – networks that are essentially networks of networks	11	-	-	-
Cross/International national – national networks that transcend jurisdictional boundaries or operate at an international level	18	3	5	26
Total	186	32	19	232

4 By ‘NGO’ we mean voluntary sector, charity and other not-for-profit organisations

5 By ‘Government Organisations’ we mean local community projects/group and national networks that are funded by government bodies

6 By ‘Other’ we mean academic institutes and private sector organisations

or private sector organisations. Using this classification, we found that the reasons why survey respondents' chose to access networks were somewhat related to the type of network they used (see Section 3.2.3).

2.3 Detailed information on identified networks

The section that follows presents information obtained from accessing networks' websites. In particular, we were interested in identifying the core remit of each network and examined whether this was affected by geographical reach, ie did local networks tend to focus solely on rural issues? Do national networks have a broad, non-specific remit that covers both urban and rural areas?

Typology by Sector

Table 3 shows that a large proportion of networks identified by survey participants were non-government organisations (NGOs). Of these, half (50%, n=93) operated at a national level whereas four in 10 (40%, n=74) operated within a small locality. Around one in 10 (10%, n=17) networks operated across a number of jurisdictions within the UK and Ireland. Those government-funded networks that were identified within the survey tended to operate at a national level.

Table 3 – Typology by Sector

	NGOs	Government funded	*Other	Total
Local				
England	37	2	2	41
Ireland	2	1	0	3
Northern Ireland	6	0	0	6
Scotland	25	6	0	31
Wales	4	0	0	4
Total Local	74	9	2	85
National				
England	20	2	2	24
Ireland	16	2	4	22
Northern Ireland	14	4	2	20
Scotland	34	6	4	44
Wales	9	2	0	11
Total National	93	16	12	121
Cross national	17	2	5	24
Total Cross national	17	2	5	24
International	1	1	0	2
Total International	1	1	0	2
Overall Total	185	28	19	232

*other includes academic institutes/centres and private sector organisations

Following on from the operational reach, we were interested in establishing the geographic focus of organisations. For example, did networks have a specific rural focus or did they operate across both rural and urban spheres? Using information provided on networks' websites, we were able to establish that 129 had a fairly general remit that covered programmes of work within both urban and rural communities, whereas 103 had a specific rural focus (Table 4). From the networks identified, those operating within a specific local area tended to focus solely on rural issues (n=48), whereas national networks were more likely to work on issues affecting both rural and urban areas (n=73).

Networks identified in our survey covered a broad range of issues from volunteering to sustainable economic and environmental development (see Appendix 7). Using information gathered from each network's website, we found that the top three themes of work covered were:

- General or non-specialist issues (28%, n=65)
- Conservation and the environment (11%, n=26)
- Community development (8%, n=20)

The top three issues covered were similar for networks that operated solely within rural areas and those that operated across both rural and urban areas.

Table 4 Remit by Network Typology

	Local	National		Cross/International	Total
		Direct	Umbrella		
Generic	37	65	8	19	129
Rural only	48	45	3	7	103
Total	85	110	11	26	232

Table 5 Membership size by Remit of network

Membership size	Generic	Rural only	Total
Small (under 100)	7	12	19
Medium (100 – 499)	8	4	12
Large (500 -10,000)	13	9	22
Very large (over 10,000)	4	4	8
Total*	32	29	61

Table 6 Number of staff by Remit of network

Number of staff	Generic	Rural only	Total
Small (one or fewer)	5	9	14
Medium (1 – 20)	34	32	66
Large (21 – 100)	11	5	16
Very large (over 100)	3	1	4
Total*	53	47	100

*for which data was available

2.4 Number of members

Of the 232 networks, we were able to find information on membership numbers for 61 networks. These ranged in size from six to 160,000 with a mean of 12,964 but a median of 300. We can conclude that the average membership is affected by a few very large, generic networks. As Table 5 below shows, 19 (31%) of the rural networks we identified were small, while 12 (20%) of the rural networks were medium, 22 (36%) were large and eight (13%) were very large.

2.5 Membership type

We accessed information about the membership type of 159 networks. Of them:

- four were closed membership
- 72 charged a fee for membership
- 56 required membership but membership is free
- 23 were open access and did not require membership.

We were not able to identify any relationship between geography or remit on the approach to membership. However, in terms of governance, those networks run by governments tended to be open access, with only one requiring membership (though this was free and enabled access to the full website).

2.6 Staffing

We were able to access information on staffing from 100 networks, ranging from no staff to 1300 staff. The average number of staff was 27, with the median number of staff being four. Again, the number of staff is affected by a few, very large, generic networks. As Table 6 shows, six of the rural networks we identified had over 20 staff (13%), compared to over a quarter of generic networks (26%, n=14).

2.7 Summary of typology

Our review of networks identified a geographical typology – local, national, government and cross/international networks. From accessing information on networks' websites, we found a number of key differences in relation to:

- Geography
- Remit
- Membership type and number
- Staffing
- Governance

The remainder of this report presents the findings from interviews with leaders of national rural development networks and the survey responses of individuals who possessed an interest in rural community development and/or worked within the field of rural development (see Appendices 1 and 5).

Chapter 3

Defining Rural Development Networks

Communication

Best practice

Expertise

Information

Campaigning

Support

Facilitation

Networking

Advice

Empowering

Partnership

Representation

Creative



3 Defining Rural Development Networks

Chapter Summary

Rural development networks were defined in terms of their:

- Membership – whether they are membership based and therefore perceived as ‘bottom-up’, or government driven, perceived as ‘top-down’
- Ability to increase capacity and skills of the communities they represent
- Networking functions, information provision and sharing best practice, enabling users to link with one another
- Means of engagement with network users – online versus face-to-face
- Distinction between rural development and rural community development (and the dominance of agriculture over community development)

Why access rural development networks?

- Despite finding no substantive differences in the reasons why participants accessed rural networks, the three most common reasons for using rural development networks were to obtain advice and information, to identify sources of funding and to share local learning and experiences.

The top five topics of interest among users and producers were:

- funding, support and advice for social enterprises, environmental issues, food issues and energy issues

Networks provided a variety of information such as:

- guides, policy briefings, case studies, templates, training opportunities, and conferences
- Rural networks made use of a variety of online and offline communication tools to engage with users such as newsletters, discussion forums, social media, field trips, video conferencing, face-to-face meetings, etc.

This chapter, using data from telephone interviews, presents network leaders' definitions of rural development networks (see Appendix 4 for more details on networks included in telephone interview). The chapter also explores survey respondents' reasons for accessing rural networks and identifies the information needs of users.

3.1 Definitions of a rural development network

During the panel telephone interviews, leaders of networks operating at national levels were asked to define what they perceived rural development networks to be. Views on what constituted a rural development network were similar across all network leaders. For instance, leaders of networks that worked directly alongside individuals and community groups, umbrella and government-funded networks commonly defined rural development networks in terms of their origins and remit, and in relation to their functions and outputs.

Networks working directly with individuals and communities – leader definition

Among this group of network leaders, a common distinction was drawn between 'bottom-up' networks, established by and for their members, and 'top-down' networks that were perceived to have been created in response to a government agenda. It was felt that

'bottom-up' networks were member defined with work plans dictated by the needs of their members. This was in contrast to 'top-down' networks, where remits were viewed as being directed by external influence.

Leaders commonly described rural development networks as existing to primarily increase the capacity and skills of the rural communities that they represented. In doing so, rural networks enable communities to share best practice, facilitate the exchange of information and provide support through online and face-to-face networking opportunities. One network leader suggested:

'A network should be able to respond to the needs of people and help up-skill them, offer advice at the moment they need it.'

'A network should be able to respond quickly with accurate information'

Network Leader

Umbrella and government-funded networks – leader definition

Similar to leaders of networks working directly with individuals and community groups, leaders of umbrella and government-funded rural development networks defined rural networks in terms of how they were organised and their outputs. Rural development networks were felt to be driven by their members and possessed an overarching capacity to share information and

resources, to disseminate information and to identify partnership working among community groups. When thinking about how rural development networks were organised, leaders of umbrella networks defined the core remit of networks as being member-led and stressed that they existed solely to enhance the skills, capacity and confidence of their members. There was the view that when networks are not led by their members, they should question their existence:

'... when a network becomes the institution in itself, it actually then doesn't do what it's supposed to do according to its constitution'

Network Leader

Leaders of umbrella networks also described rural development networks in terms of engagement with members and the transfer of information. For example, there was the view that one of the core functions of a rural development network was to enable members to engage in networking opportunities. This view was framed in terms of the current financial climate and the austerity measures that many networks are experiencing. When discussing networking and the impact of funding cuts, network leaders felt that their networks were looking for creative solutions to support their members. For example, there was a view that networks should embrace online technologies and tele-networking

facilities, such as video conferencing, in combination with face-to-face networking opportunities. One leader noted:

‘... as networkers, we need to become more creative about how we enable people to share ... information ... The ... definition of networking, so to speak, is that of the exchange of information. How we do it and who we do it with changes over time depending on common interests’
Network Leader

Distinction between rural development and rural community development

When defining rural development networks, leaders raised concerns in relation to what they described as the growing distinction between rural development and rural community development. It was suggested that there has been an increase in the dominance of agricultural policy, which is reflected in local, national and international government policy and funding streams. It was felt that this shift in priority has implications for the way in which government bodies approach rural issues. One leader stressed:

‘We are concerned ... that there’s a growing trend to focus on economic and agricultural development which leaves behind the ordinary people who are struggling at the present minute because of

the recession, because of the centralisation of services, because of the cutbacks. And rural community development and community development in general is beginning to fall off the table’
Network Leader

While analysis of our survey data does show that a number of rural community development networks currently exist, it is possible that the shift in focus to agricultural policy is likely to reduce the funding available for rural community development. This has the potential to reduce the number of networks operating within the field and therefore reduce the likelihood of keeping rural community issues at the forefront of governmental thought.

3.2 Why access rural development networks?

We were interested in finding out about the reasons why individuals access rural development networks. The section that follows presents data from interviews with network leaders on the type of information and the communication formats that their networks use to engage with their members.

Type of information provided

Network leaders described the type of information provided by rural development

networks both in terms of the nature of the information and the means in which it was distributed. When asked specifically about their network websites, all network leaders reflected on the importance of their website as a key driver for engaging with their members. The types of information that networks provided via their website were:

- Policy briefings
- Funding initiatives
- Best practice guides and tools
- Thematic issues (such as housing, poverty, broadband connection, etc)
- Information or ‘fact’ packs
- Case studies
- Profiling of community groups/projects
- Contact details of community groups/projects
- Publications (produced by the networks themselves or circulation of other’s)
- Sample documents and templates
- Project databases
- Events (seminars and conferences)
- Training opportunities

Network leaders, across each type of network identified in our typology, highlighted that the information their network provided was highly member-driven and tailored specifically to the needs of their members. For instance, one network leader highlighted that:

‘one of the most . . . valued things is information on funding, information on support that’s available for people who are wanting to develop projects, wanting to develop new initiatives. So there’s a fair degree of self-interest in that people want to be kept up to date with that’

Network Leader

In addition to the information provided by networks, members also contributed to website content, either by uploading their own content (where members had access to their network’s interactive forum/blogging facilities) or by directly approaching networks to upload information on their behalf. In this sense, there was the view that networks were both proactive and reactive, meaning that networks actively responded to the information needs of their members, as well as providing information on wider rural policy issues.

Information needs of users

To understand the information needs of users, network leaders were asked to describe the type of web interface their network used to engage and communicate with their members. For most, network websites were fairly static platforms that were used primarily as a source of information. Leaders of networks with static websites stressed that while it was their intention to move to a ‘more interactive’ platform in the future, this was something

Table 7 – Information Matrix

Type of web interface	Information posted on website	Discussion forums	Engage in social media	Newsletters	Face-to-face contact
Direct network serving individuals and community groups					
Interactive (members area)	1	1	1	1	1
Static platform	9	7	6	9	9
Umbrella network (overarching network of networks)					
Interactive (members area)	5	5	3	5	5
Static platform	-	-	-	-	-
Government-funded network					
Interactive (members area)	-	-	-	-	-
Static platform	4	3	2	4	4
Total	15	14	12	15	15

that they had not been able to achieve due to financial constraints. Furthermore, while network leaders recognised the benefits that interactive platforms could offer their members, almost all had begun to adopt social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, which proved to be extremely successful in terms of engagement with and between members.

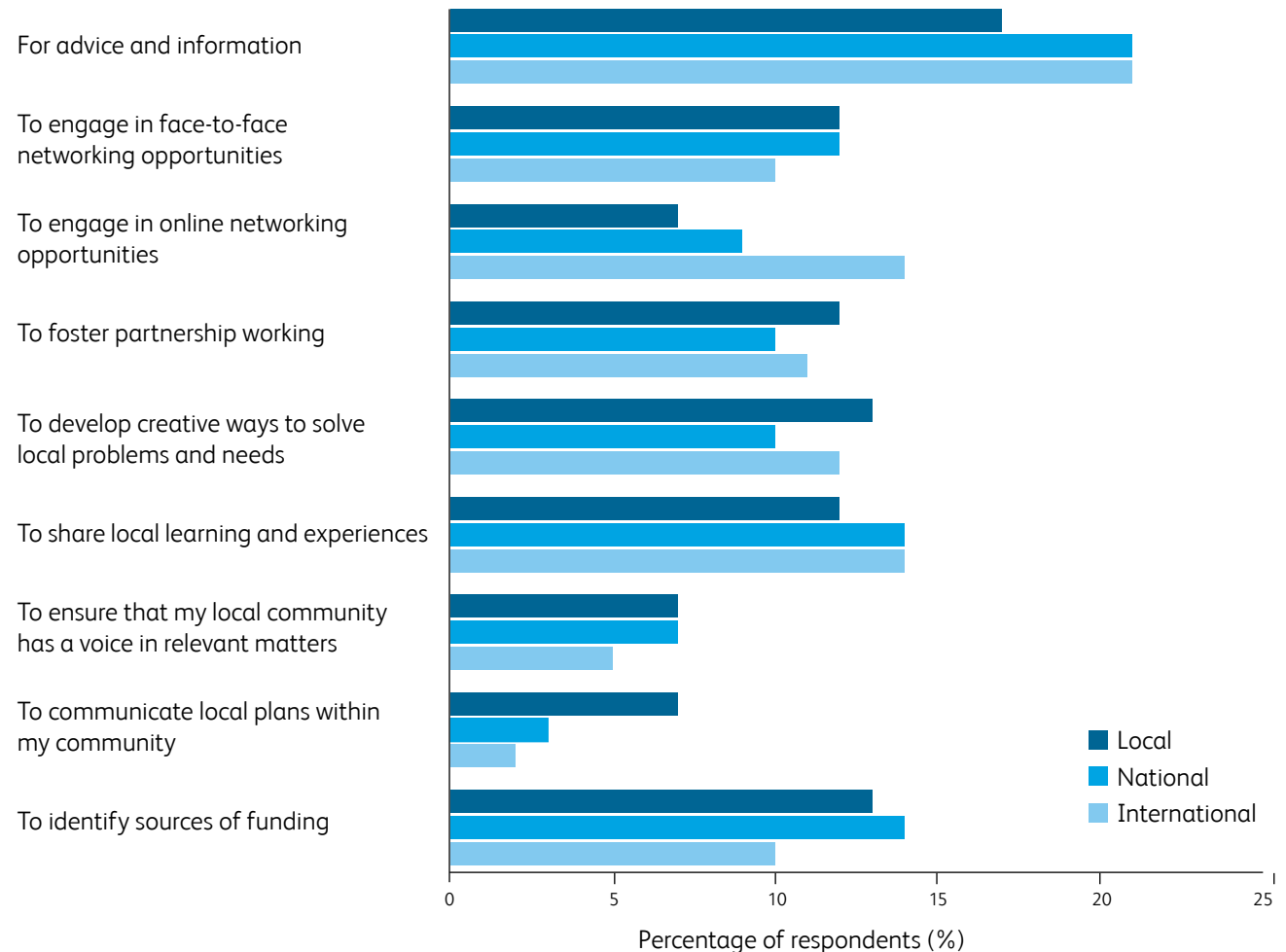
Where network members had access to specific 'member areas' of their network's website, they were able to upload their own content, interact and network with other members. Table 7 illustrates the forms of communication that networks engaged in with their members.

Reason for accessing networks (survey responses)

This section presents data collected as part of the online survey. Survey participants were asked to indicate the reasons why they accessed rural development networks. Participants were first asked to list three networks they accessed most frequently. Participants were then asked to look at a list and select a reason that captured why they specifically chose to access them (see Appendix 8.1 & 8.2).

Figure 1.1 shows the reasons why survey respondents access local, national and cross/international networks (Appendix 8.1). The reasons why participants accessed networks

Figure 1.1 – Reasons for accessing rural development networks by typology (%)⁷



⁷Please note small numbers in some categories

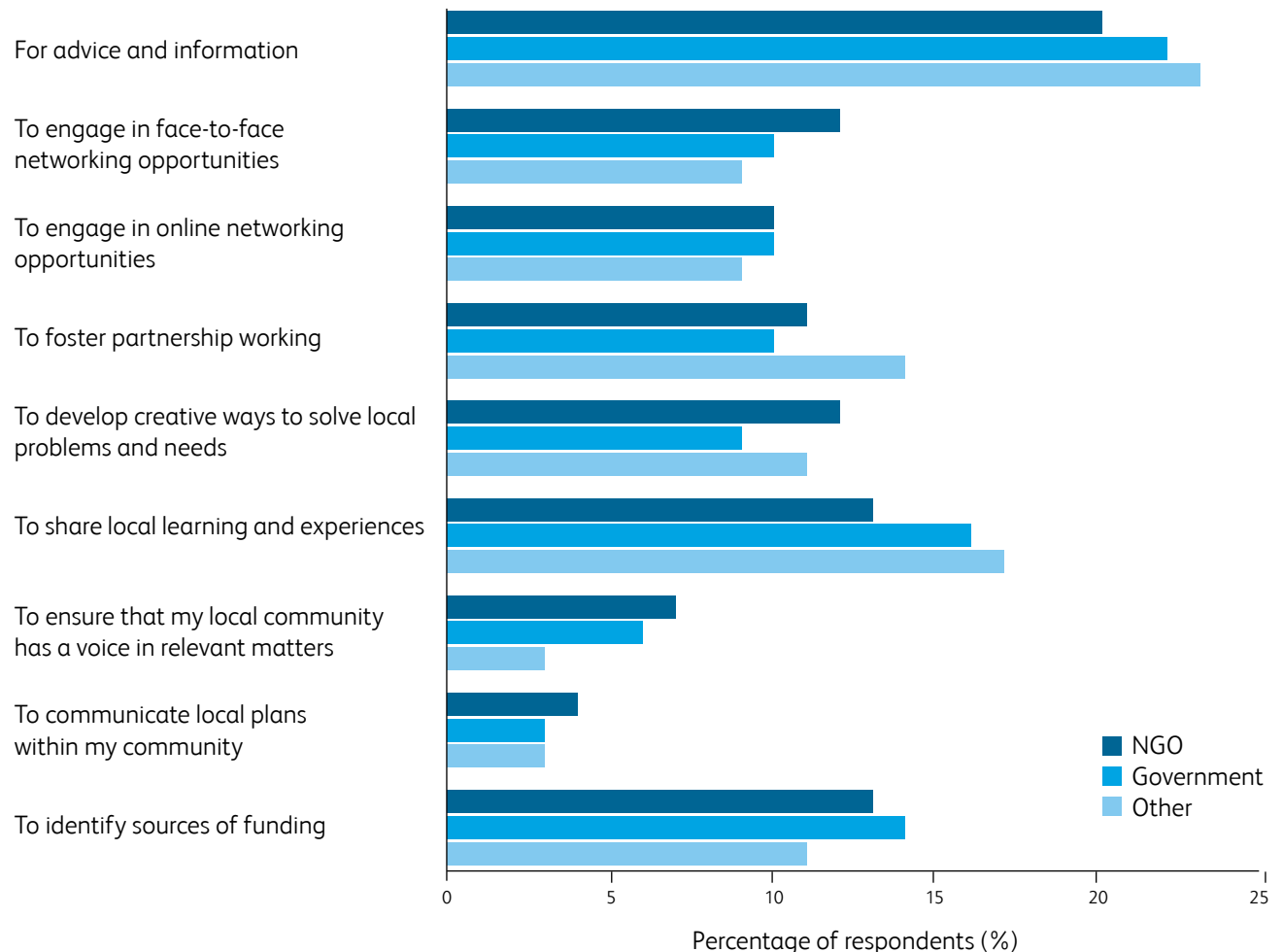
were broadly similar across each type of network and the most common reasons why participants used these networks was to:

- **Receive advice and information** (local 17%, n=35; national 21%, n=166; cross/international 22%, n=40)
- **To share local learning and experiences** (12%, n=26; national 14%, n=107; cross/international 14%, n=27)
- **To identify sources of funding** (NGO 13%, n=27; government 14%, n=107; cross/international 10%, n=18)

While Figure 1.1 shows that survey participants were more likely to access national networks (14%, n=107) and local (13%, n=27) than cross/international networks (10%, n=18) to identify sources of funding and more likely to access international networks (14%, n=27) than local (7%, n=14) and national (9%, n=73) networks to engage in online networking opportunities, caution should be used when attributing any associations to these networks due to the small number of participants in these categories.

When categorising networks in terms of their governance, ie NGO, government and other, again we found no real differences in the reasons why participants chose to access networks (Appendix 8.2). However, Figure 1.2

Figure 1.2 – Reasons for accessing rural development networks by type of network (%)⁸



⁸ Aggregate user and activist responses for the top three networks accessed.

shows that the most common reasons why participants accessed 'NGO's', 'government-funded' and 'other' networks were:

- **To receive advice and information** (NGO 20% n=186; government 22%, n=46; other 23%, n=8)
- **To share local learning and experiences** (NGO 13%, n=121; government 16%, n=33; other 17%, n=6)
- **To identify sources of funding** (NGO 13%, n=118; government 14%, n=29; cross/international 11%, n=4)

Despite finding no substantive difference in the reasons why participants accessed rural development networks by geographical remit or governance, the three most common reasons why participants use rural networks were to:

- Obtain advice and information
- Identify sources of funding
- Share local learning and experiences.

What users of networks like finding out from rural networks

When looking to the survey data to explore the type of information that survey respondents⁹ would like to receive from rural development networks (Appendix 9) we found that the top five topics of most interest were:

- **Funding** – Around half (52%, n=34) of users and around three fifths of producers (58%, n=88) were interested in finding out about funding
- **Support and advice for social enterprises** – Over two fifths (44%, n=29) of users and almost half (48%, n=73) of producers were interested in finding out about support and advice for social enterprises
- **Environmental issues** – Over two in five (44%, n=29) users and around half (52% n=79) of producers reported that they were interested in receiving information on environmental issues
- **Food** – Over a third (35%, n=23) of users and under half (45%, n=68) of producers were interested in finding out about food issues
- **Energy** – Around a third (35% n=23) of users and around two fifths (44%, n=67) of producers were interested in energy issues

Means of communicating with members (panel interviews)

The remainder of this chapter summaries data collected from telephone interviews with leaders of rural development networks. One of the overarching aims of rural development networks is to promote the successful engagement with and between members. With this in mind, all network leaders noted that their networks utilised a variety of tools when communicating with their members. These were:

- Weekly, monthly and quarterly e-newsletters
- Six monthly magazines (providing case studies)
- Network website
- Online discussion forum
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Linked-in)
- Interactive member area of network website
- Information phone lines/telephone exchange groups
- Video conferencing
- Face-to-face meetings with groups
- Field trips

The key advantage of using a range of communication tools was that it enabled members to pick and choose a format that was appropriate for them. It was also suggested that having a range of methods was particularly beneficial for members who were perhaps less engaged with online technologies. In such instances, network leaders stressed the importance of face-to-face networking, the publication of newsletters and the possessing ability to answer member queries by telephone.

Newsletters

Newsletters were a popular form of communication with members and were used by all network types to notify members of training events and networking opportunities. Newsletters were also used to profile particular community groups or projects and also featured articles sharing best practice from further afield.

9 Survey respondents were categorised as being either users or rural development networks or producers. By producers we mean those who are both users of networks AND involved in the day-to-day running of a rural development network

Discussion forums

Network leaders actively sought to explore new ways of encouraging dialogue among their members and they often acted upon the advice and feedback from members. For example, several network leaders mentioned that members actively requested discussion forums within their networks' website. However, at the time of interview, all network leaders commonly reported that member contributions to discussion forums were relatively low and encouraging member participation was felt to be a difficult task. Despite this, one network leader highlighted that while member contributions to discussions forums were low, analysis of their website traffic statistics showed that access to the forums was high, therefore suggesting that members used discussion forums as a source of information.

Social media

Social media was something that most networks had begun to engage in. Network leaders described their initial apprehension when adopting social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and Linked-in. However, they found that despite their initial concerns, members actively responded to Facebook and Twitter in a more successful way than on their main network website.

'[Facebook] has been really successful in getting members to engage with the network and one another'

Network Leader

'We did a quick examination of it [social networking] . . . and we were surprised to find that actually it's probably accounting for more connection and real engagement between members than even the website . . . we're beginning to realise it's actually more effective than we thought'

Network Leader

It was felt that the reason for the success of social networking media was due to the fact members were already actively engaged with social media either on a professional or personal level.

Networks tended to use social media as a means of alerting members about their networks' activities and in a sense, social media was used as a means of driving members back to the main network website. For example, one government network leader suggested that their website was a place where they generated information, whereas Facebook and Twitter was utilised as a means of raising awareness of website content and network activities. Social media was therefore used as a way of generating response among members and directing them back to the network's website.

Despite the success of social media, network leaders raised concerns in terms of the level of staffing resources required to manage social networking media effectively. Concerns were also

raised in relation to the exclusion of certain groups who would not normally utilise online technology. This was something that networks were balancing with offline communication strategies.

Interactive member areas

There was noticeable enthusiasm among all network leaders to have a space for members to create and upload their own content on network websites. Among leaders whose networks had interactive web areas, there was the view that those platforms provided a space where members could interact and discuss thematic issues that were a common concern. One leader of an umbrella network suggested that their interactive members' area was an extremely fast way of communicating policy and funding initiatives. They also suggested that it was an effective method for filtering information down to small-scale community groups and projects.

For those who did not have interactive web areas, there was a common view that this was something they would ideally like to adopt, although they had been prevented from doing so due to financial and staffing constraints. One umbrella network leader reflected:

'we toyed with the idea . . . and still haven't discounted it. But we've only got a small staff team, and just trying to service the network is quite difficult . . . But we would never discount that to be an option in the future.'

Network Leader

For others, there was a sense that while their networks had discussed plans for an interactive platform in the future, they were currently experiencing significant successes in terms of engaging with members through Facebook and Twitter.

Informal contact face-to-face meetings, field trips and phone calls

Network leaders also described how their networks were engaged in a variety of 'offline' activities in relation to networking and the dissemination of information. For example, networks encouraged members to visit other network members and community groups through field trips and face-to-face meetings. All network leaders felt that face-to-face contact with members was crucial. A common view was that face-to-face encounters were the best way to interact with members. One government-funded network leader suggested that they had very strong links on a personal level with their members and that one-to-one contact was the preferred method of communication. However, this was achieved due to the fact that the area they represented was relatively small and it was recognised that this is not always possible to achieve in other regions.

There was the view that while websites provided the information content, it was the personal, face-to-face encounters that were the key 'advice-giving' aspect of their work. However, while personal contact was viewed as the preferred method for engaging with members, network leaders recognised that face-to-face contact was often limited by time and financial constraints. In response to this, networks were focusing on holding fewer but higher-quality networking events that were driven by the priorities of their members.

A final means of communicating with members was through phone calls. Leaders highlighted that their members were able to pick up the phone to discuss particular issues of concern.

Chapter 4

Benefits of involvement in rural development networks



4 Benefits of involvement in rural development networks

Chapter Summary

Benefits of involvement with rural development networks:

- 71% of both users and producers reported that they were extremely or quite confident in their ability to engage and participate in their local community as a result of their involvement in rural networks
- A majority of both users and producers (52%) were least confident in their ability to take over the delivery of local services
- Producers (82%) were significantly more likely than users (61%) to agree or strongly agree that they had been able to engage in face-to-face networking as a result of their involvement in rural development networks
- Producers (70%) were significantly more likely than users (43%, n=23) to agree or strongly agree that they had increased their partnership working with others in their local community.
- Producers (61%) were significantly more likely than users (28%) to report that they agreed or strongly agreed that their involvement in rural networks had ensured that their local community had a voice in relevant matters.
- Producers (58%) were significantly more likely than users (30%) to report that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had been able to communicate local plans within their local community.
- The majority of producers (94%) and users (85%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had been able to receive information and advice from their involvement in rural networks.
- 82% of producers and 70% of users agreed or strongly agreed that they had been able to identify sources of funding through their involvement in rural development networks.

Confidence in network:

- Producers were most confident in their networks' ability to engage in events and projects to share best practice (73%), deliver events to share best practice (73%), influence rural policy (73%) and continue to deliver existing services (65%)
- Producers were least confident in their networks' ability to influence national rural policy (50%); sustain current funding (46%) and access additional funding (45%) and deliver additional services (44%)

This chapter presents data from survey respondents and explores the benefits that are to be gained from accessing rural development networks.

Survey respondents were asked to reflect on their involvement in rural development networks and in turn, indicate how confident they felt in tackling a range of rural community issues (Appendix 10). Figure 2 shows that respondents were most likely to report that they were extremely or quite confident in their ability to:

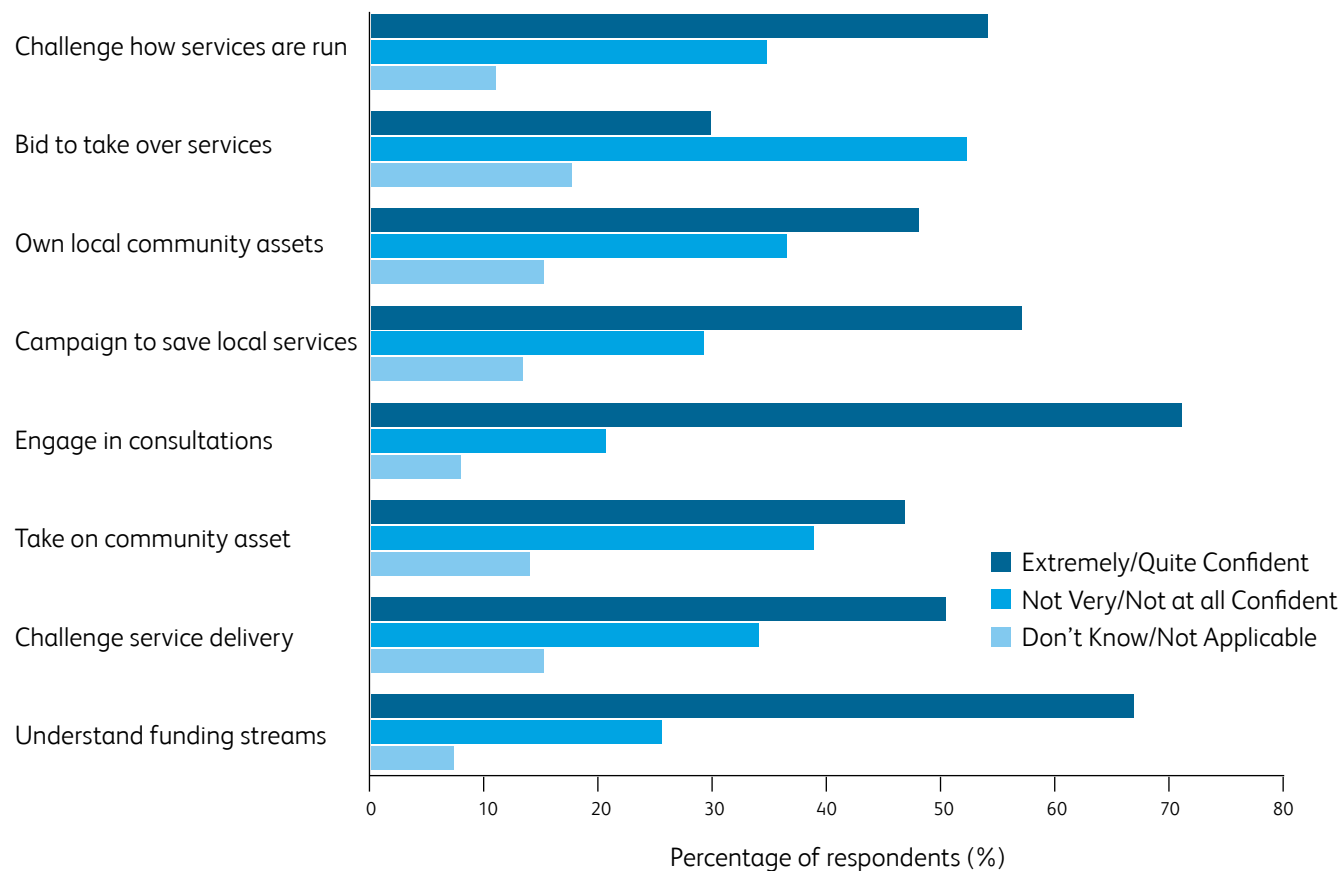
- Engage in consultations (71%, n=117)
- Identify sources of funding (67%, n=110)
- Campaign to save local services (57%, n=94)

However, respondents reported that they 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 survey respondents were confident that they could 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

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



increasingly under pressure to take on a greater role in the ownership of community assets. This suggests that this may be an area in which networks could support their members.

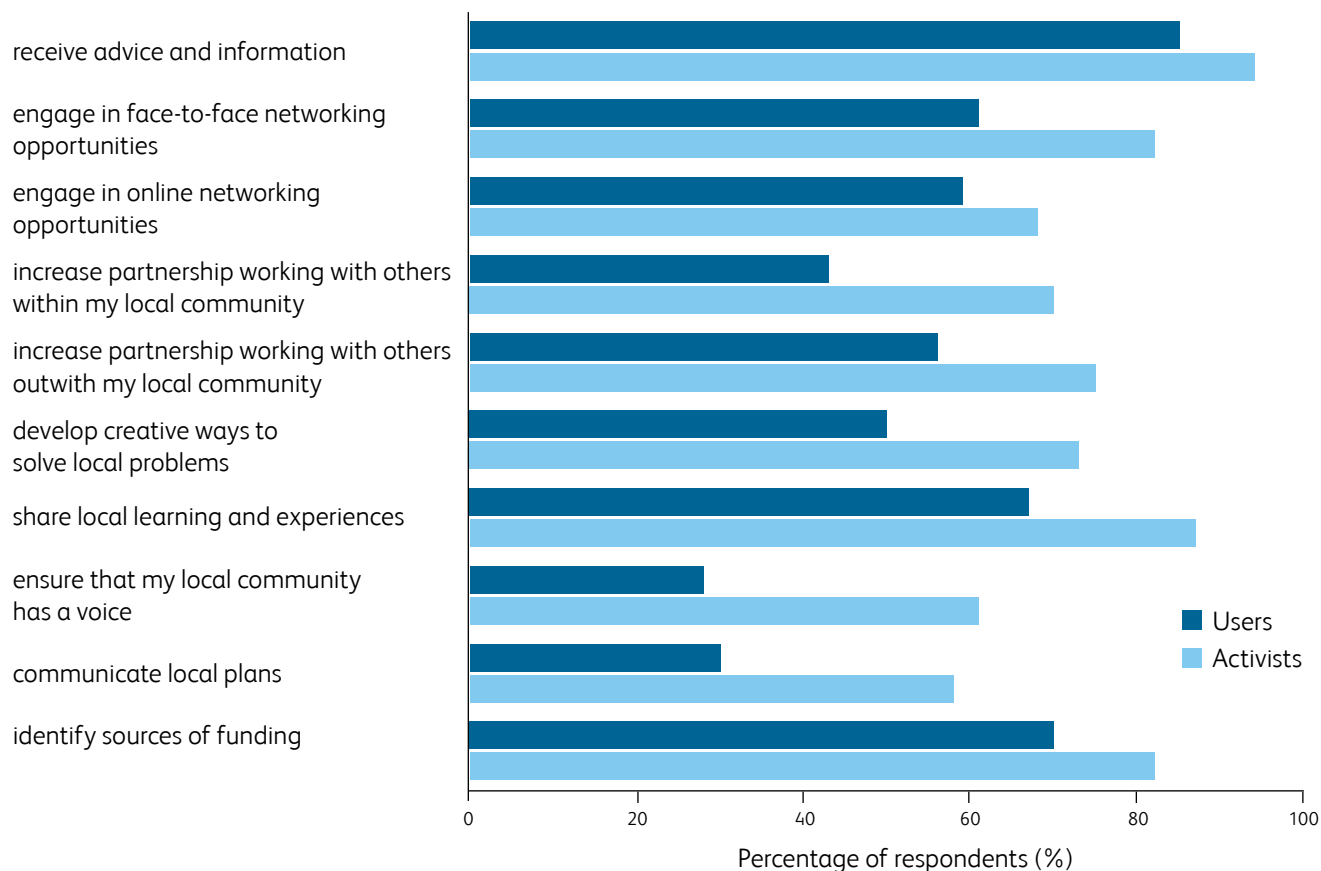
Facilitation

In order to assess the ways in which rural development networks facilitated individuals’ ability to engage with their local community, respondents were asked to report to what extent they felt that their own involvement in rural development networks had enabled them to participate in a range of activities.

Overall, producers reported higher levels of agreement than users in terms of their ability to engage and receive a range of services through their involvement with rural networks (see Appendix 11). One possible reason for this is perhaps due to the fact that producers are involved with the day-to-day running of networks and as a result, may possess greater level of awareness of where to access required information and how to make the best possible use of networks. Those involved with networks may also have a greater overall awareness of existing community projects and networking events within their local area.

Figure 3 shows that producers (82%, n=107) were significantly¹⁰ more likely than users (61%,

Figure 3 – Involvement in rural networks by type of respondent (“Agree/strongly agree that involvement in rural networks has enabled me to ...”)

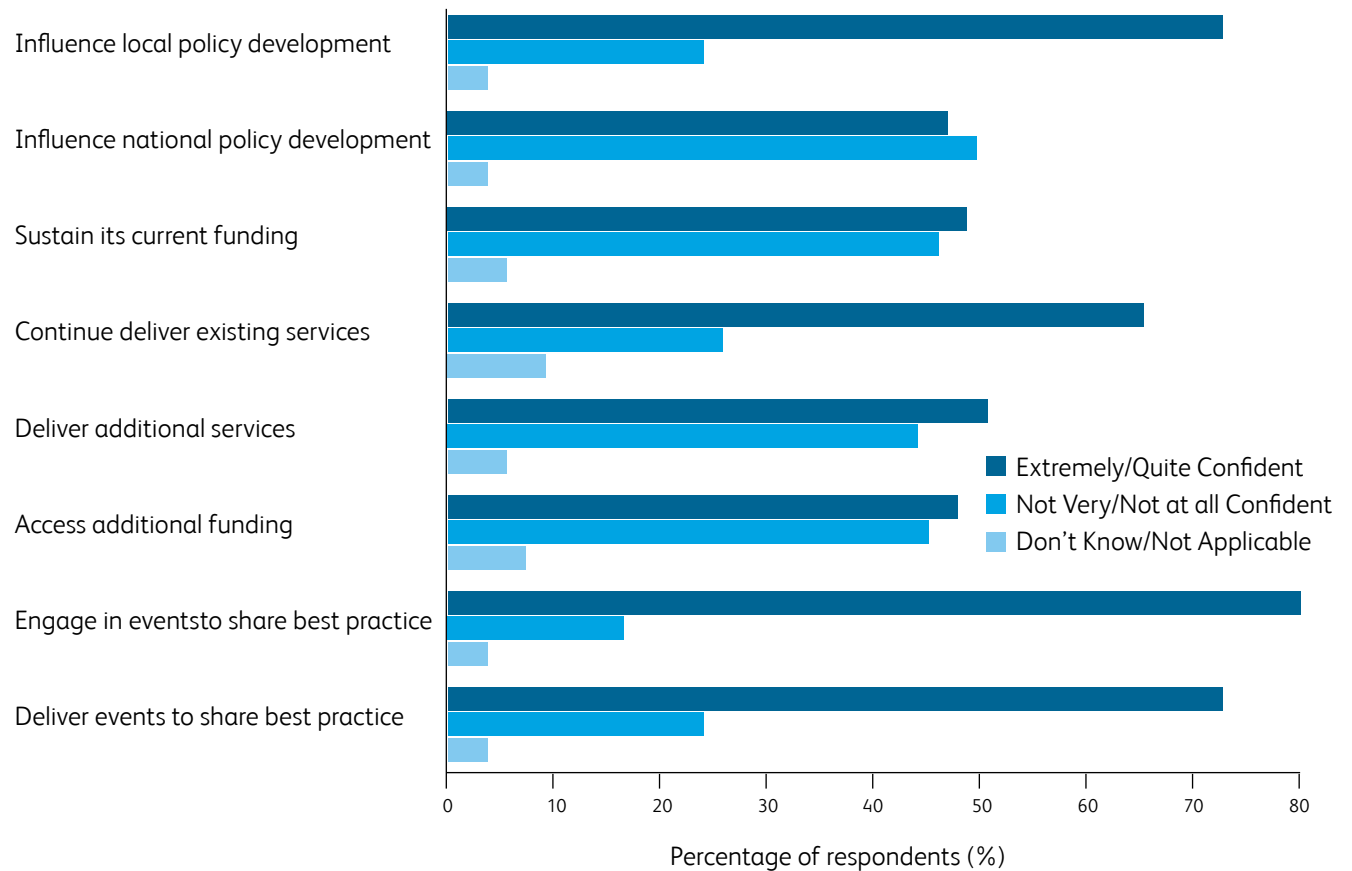


¹⁰ Caution should be taken when observing statistically significant figures, as the survey sample is not representative of network users across the UK and Ireland.

n=33) to report that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had been able to engage in face-to-face networking opportunities as a result of their involvement with rural networks. Around seven in 10 (68%, n=77) producers agreed or strongly agreed that they had been able to engage in online networking opportunities, compared with three fifths (59%, n=32) of users. Producers (70%, n=80) were also significantly more likely than users (43%, n=23) to report that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had increased their partnership working with others within their community. Producers (75%, n=86) were also more likely than users (56%, n=30) to agree or strongly agree that they had been able to increase their partnership working with other communities or community projects.

Around three in four (73%, n=86) producers reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that their involvement with rural networks had enabled them to develop creative ways to solve local problems, compared with half (50%, n=27) of users. The vast majority of producers (87%, n=99) reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that rural networks had enabled them to share local learning and experiences, compared with users (67%, n=36). Producers (61%, n=69) were significantly more likely than users (28%, n=15) to have agreed or strongly agreed that their involvement in rural networks had ensured that their local community had a voice in relevant matters. Similarly, producers

Figure 4 – Confidence in organisation’s ability over next five years



*Only asked of those who indicated that they were producers

(58%, n=66) were significantly more likely than users (30%, n=16) to report that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had been able to communicate local plans within their local community.

While disparities did exist between users' and producers' levels of agreement across most question items, similarities were found in terms of those reporting that they had received information and advice. For example, the vast majority of users (85%, n=46) and producers (94%, n=107) agreed or strongly agreed that they had received advice and information. Similarly, a large majority of users (70%, n=38) and producers (82%, n=93) agreed or strongly agreed that they had been able to identify sources of funding through their involvement in rural networks.

Capacity of existing networks

Those producers who were involved with the running of networks were asked to consider how confident they were in terms of their organisation's ability to engage in a range of activities over the next five years (Appendix 12).

Figure 4 above shows that out of the activities listed, respondents felt most confident in terms of their organisations' ability to:

- Engage in events and projects that share best practice in rural development (80%, n=87)
- Deliver events and projects that share best practice in rural development (73%, n=79)
- Influence local policy development on rural issues (73%, n=79)
- Continue delivering existing services to rural communities (65%, n=71)

Respondents were least confident in their organisations' ability to:

- Influence national policy on rural development issues (50%, n=54)
- Sustain current funding for rural development activities (46%, n=50)
- Access additional funding for rural development activities (45%, n=49)
- Deliver additional services to rural communities (44%, n=48)

While those involved with the day-to-day running of networks were confident in their organisations' ability to continue delivering existing services, they were least confident in the ability of their organisation to influence national policy and deliver additional services. This finding is particularly relevant in a climate where the political landscape for rural development is changing rapidly across each jurisdiction and Europe.

Chapter 5

Key issues for rural development networks



5 Key issues for rural development networks

Section Summary

Key issues for rural development networks were:

- **Funding** – cuts across the UK and Ireland were 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.
- **Engagement with users** – networks increasingly utilised online communication tools such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. They were also beginning to think creatively about the format of their websites as well as the volume of information they provide their members with. However, concerns were raised in relation to the shift to online networking in relation to digital uptake and broadband coverage.
- **Communication and technology** – The Internet has provided networks with the opportunity to disperse information to more people, as social media gives them with the opportunity to network virtually. This was embraced by some networks, but not others.
- **Representation and visibility** – Those who were actively involved with the delivery of services were least confident in their organisations' ability to influence national rural policy.
- **Prominence of rural issues** – the distinction made between rural community development and agricultural, environmental rural development among policy makers 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.
- **Facilitation and moderation** – Survey participants were least confident in their ability to take over the ownership of community assets or the delivery of local services
- **Partnership working** – Rural development networks were keen to engage in joined-up working with partner organisations. Partnership working was felt to 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.

This chapter presents findings from rural development network leaders' accounts of the key issues that rural networks face in the current economic and political landscape.

5.1 Funding

Network leaders identified four key areas where the effects of funding cuts had been felt, both within their own networks and that of their members. The key areas were:

- the effects of funding reductions in terms of staff resources
- the effects of funding in relation to their ability to sustain networking activities and website functions
- the effects of financial cuts in relation to organisational cut-backs and restructuring.
- Administration and bureaucracy experienced when applying for funding was also discussed.

Reduction in funded staff and the knock-on effects

The knock-on effects of funding cuts were discussed in terms of the reduction of staff resources within both leaders' own networks and that of their members' organisations. Network leaders discussed the impact that this reduction had, both in terms of their ability to respond to member requests for information and requests

to host and fund networking events. The fear among network leaders was that if their networks were not able to adequately respond to members' requests, members would begin to disengage and take the view that the networks were unfit for purpose.

Similar to their members, rural networks also experienced the effects of reduced funding in terms of justifying paid staff time and maintaining the delivery of the network's services. One network leader described the pressure of accounting for each hour of their time and ensuring that time was spent in a constructive way:

'... every hour I spend is running our resources down so ... I have to feel that I'm really using that time well'

Network Leader

For some leaders, particularly those whose network worked directly with individuals and groups, the solution to the financial and staffing cuts was a shift to more online operations that could be easily managed and moderated with minimal resources. While it was felt that networks had to maintain the flow of information and communication for their members, they had to do this in a way that did not rely on staff. One network had already begun to look for ways for supporting networking activities without any staffing or

funding costs. It was suggested that the reliance on funding within the current financial climate would inevitable result in a failure to deliver.

In addition, one leader spoke of how their network had been able to survive without funding. It was suggested that the key was to set up structures that enabled members and communities to be self-sufficient, to network and share learning among themselves. There was the view that in such circumstances, it was possible to run networks entirely on voluntary resources. However, one contrasting opinion raised concerns for those networks that engage in lobbying activities. It was suggested that lobbying networks do require some form of staffing and cannot operate with zero funding.

Making organisational cuts where possible

The direct effect of funding cuts upon the structural organisation of networks was discussed by all network leaders. For instance, network leaders suggested that both they and their members' organisations were looking for innovative ways in which to survive within the current financial climate. For some, that meant thinking about the possibility of merging or joining up with partner organisations. Indeed, there was a suggestion among some leaders that there was a need for 'rationalisation' and potential merging of networks, particularly if this ensured the 'survival' of rural networks.

However, for others, there was a cautionary view that merging with other rural development networks was not necessarily a cost-cutting measure or easy thing to achieve. For example, it was felt consideration had to be given to organisational, as indicated below:

‘the issue of merging, it’s quite a difficult one . . . if you are being honest . . . would you have as many networks as you’ve got in Scotland? The answer would be no but, of course, they’ve all developed organically. I mean there’s a strong identity with the networks and they’re all member led, and it makes it very difficult to begin to look at formal mergers . . . you can have closer working relationships, but it’s a big step from mergers’
Network Leader

Despite funding cuts, there was the suggestion that some networks had been able to continue to access support that both they and their members required by developing partnerships and interdependencies with other networks. In addition, there was the a feeling networks could continue to look for new opportunities of operating by developing ‘horizontal links’ as opposed to the previous ‘vertical links’ that they previously relied upon, ie funding support. For example:

‘in the situation of economic difficulty . . . organisations and networks . . . can actually seem more relevant and more useful’
Network Leader

Notwithstanding, there was a view that some community organisations were expecting to witness the complete withdrawal of funding by 2012. It was against this backdrop of cuts that one network leader suggested that their network had already begun to witness a downturn in membership subscriptions. It was felt that this was due to member organisations looking to cut down on what was perceived to be non-essential expenses. One way of doing this was to cancel membership fees to rural development networks.

Administration and bureaucracy involved with funding process

Leaders of networks, specifically those working directly with individuals and community groups, described the bureaucratic and administrative processes involved in applying for funding as being a key issue for community organisations. It was suggested that the process of applying to government agencies was overly burdensome for organisations. In addition, there was the view that funding bodies should adapt to the needs of rural organisations. One network leader described the difficulties in receiving European funding that they had been awarded. In this

instance, the network received their funding 18 months in arrears, which was inoperable for community organisations. There was the feeling that:

‘wherever we get the money from has to actually understand how voluntary organisations work’
Network Leader

5.2 Priority of rural community development

Network leaders felt that there had been a distinct change in focus and priority of rural community development among government and funding bodies. This was largely discussed in terms of the prominence of rural community development within the wider rural development agenda and in terms of lobbying power and government support for rural community development.

Definition of rural

Network leaders discussed the need for rural community development to receive more recognition and prominence among government departments and funding bodies. There was the view that definitions and perceptions of ‘rural’ among government bodies tended to focus on agriculture which in turn

made it difficult to lobby for rural community issues or access funding. One network leader described:

'To them [ministers] a rural agenda [i]s about farming. So I guess the problem at the moment is dominance about how the rural agenda is perceived. And that seems to be very much about agriculture at the moment. And much less about rural communities'
Network Leader

Partnership working

There was a view among leaders that there was a need for better coordination and joined-up working among networks in order to establish a collective voice and lobbying power of rural issues. It was felt that networks and their members would benefit from partnership working as there was the view that currently, users have to access of multiple networks in order to gain the information that they require. It was suggested that networks could work together more effectively to share information and best practice with their members. One leader suggested that while merging into one super network was not necessarily the answer, better links between networks were required.

'I don't think anyone can produce the one network. I think it's actually about . . . the connections between us all, that's the future'
Network Leader

There was a view among all network leaders that there was a general dominance of agricultural and economic rural development and a sense that after the 2013 common agricultural policy, the farmers' lobby, land managers and the environmental lobby would be strongest. This presented a challenge for those working within the field of rural community development. It was suggested that there was a need to develop a collective voice in order to share information on rural community issues at local, national and European levels.

Support provision reduction and empowerment of rural networks

When discussing the profile of rural community development, network leaders felt that there was a requirement of government and funding bodies to address community development and provide the appropriate support mechanisms to empower organisations to support the communities that they represent. This issue was raised particularly in relation to the requirement of rural community networks and organisations to deliver policy agendas. For example, one network leader suggested that the pressure for rural communities to actively embrace ownership of public services and community assets are not backed with the resources to support and empower them to do so:

'On the one hand, our members are being pushed to do more, but the support to enable them to do that is being whittled back and we're finding that very much harder, to find . . . government support to do things to deliver government policy'
Network leader

5.3 Networking and engagement

Network leaders across all network types discussed issues around networking and member engagement as one of the key issues for their networks.

Networking

For network leaders, there was a specific emphasis in relation to the factors that prevent or enable networking to take place. For instance, a common view among network leaders was that financial constraints had negatively impacted the level of networking opportunities both between networks and among members. Funding cuts had meant that networks and their members engaged in less and less networking simply because they did not have the staffing or financial resources to attend or host events. One network leader suggested that:

‘a lot of people are struggling to complete the work they have to do, and find it hard to create time to participate in an active way in networking’

Network Leader

Similarly, one government-funded network leader emphasised that their network no longer engaged in national events due to funding constraints. In response to having less time and reduced finances, it was suggested that there was a need for networks and their members to adopt alternative approaches to thinking about networking. There was the view that ‘networking’ should be understood in its broadest sense with a need for a cultural shift in thinking that networking is something that can only happen face-to-face.

Buy-in from management and funding bodies

Leaders of umbrella and government-funded networks spoke of the difficulties of achieving the support or ‘buy-in’ for networking among senior management figures within local Government and Local Authorities. It was felt that influential figures regularly missed finding out about innovative practice that was taking place within rural communities. It was suggested by one government-funded network leader that:

‘there’s definitely a gap for us to work together and therefore raise the profile of networking together’

Network Leader

In relation to raising the profile of networking, there was the feeling among leaders of networks for individuals and groups that funding bodies could support networking activities by providing funding for membership subscriptions, websites and for travelling and attending events and conferences.

5.4 Communication challenges

Communication and engagement with network members were viewed as being a key issue for all network leaders. Discussions focused around encouraging and enabling members to access information and advice and overcoming information technology barriers.

Engaging Members through Dialogue

Umbrella network leaders suggested that they had noticed a decline in the level of dialogue among members. It was suggested that while members appeared to consume the information that was posted on their network site, there was a lack of discussion around it. The lack of discussion and feedback was thought to be a feature of funding cuts. For instance, it was suggested that members are increasingly under pressure to deliver services due to the reduction of staff, thus they have limited capacity to respond to and engage with information as they may have done in the past.

Network leaders felt that members’ time was increasingly stretched and this was felt to be a real concern. In turn, there was the view that networks have to ensure they are a valuable resource for their members in order to prevent them from disengaging.

Information Technology

Leaders suggested that for some, particularly older, generations were unwilling to adopt information technology, perhaps as this was something that was unfamiliar to them. Furthermore, it was felt that this lack of engagement with information technology posed particular communicational challenges for networks, and there was a concern that certain groups within rural communities would be left behind or excluded from accessing information. However, it was further recognised that:

‘The key is accepting that not everybody is going to want to engage in one of those forums in the same way a lot of people involved in rural development don’t like online exchanges – they don’t like using social media, they don’t like using new technology and would prefer to join a teleconference so they can actually speak their minds and hear other people say stuff’

Network Leader

Chapter 6

Future of rural development networks



6 Future of rural development networks

Chapter Summary

Network leaders' thoughts on the future of rural development networks:

- Increase partnership working between rural development networks to improve user access to information and reduce the need for multiple memberships
- Increase links between networks to increase lobbying power and keep rural issues at the fore of political agendas
- Engage in joined-up working to prevent duplication of effort
- Adopt flexible operating structures to be able to adapt to crisis and sudden change
- Engage in online networking (key for survival, more cost effective)

Survey respondents' thoughts on service improvements:

- Networks should provide information on training and employment opportunities, advice on funding opportunities, information on rural policy at local and national levels and engage in policy discussions and consultations at local and national levels
- Networks could better support communities through online facilitation and moderation – for example, respondents felt that they would benefit from access to an online project database or online mentoring facility (whereby a practitioner would be available online to answer specific queries)

Survey respondents' thoughts on how rural networks can support local communities:

- More work around raising the profile and visibility of networks
- Increase visibility by maximising online networking facilities such as Facebook and Twitter
- Networks difficult to identify because of the large number of them in existence
- Provide a local voice and keep rural issues on the political agenda (locally, nationally, and internationally)
- Establish stronger links with parishes, villages and towns (utilise existing sources of information)

After discussing the key challenges facing both their own and their member's networks, leaders were asked to consider how networks may develop and evolve in the coming years. Participant responses largely fell into three main themes:

- those who discussed the future of networks in relation to partnership and joined-up working
- those who discussed the requirement of networks to adopt flexible operational structures
- those who discussed the future of rural development networks in the context of technology.

6.1 Network leaders' views on the future of rural networks

Partnership working

Leaders across all networks discussed their desire for more linkages and partnership working between networks to improve members' access to information. It was suggested that users often have to access multiple networks in order to obtain the information that they require. It was therefore felt that there was a very real need to create looser, informal networking where organisations could feed their expertise and skills into an overarching network. In particular, one network leader, discussed the structures of networks in Scotland:

'... at the moment, you look at some fairly small community organisations will be members of five, six, seven networks ... there's a real danger of separating rural networks within Scotland ... there's a benefit and strength of generic approach that takes account of different challenges'
Network Leader

Partnership working was seen to have the potential to increase the lobbying power of community development, whilst ensuring that rural issues remain on the political agenda. This was particularly relevant when network leaders discussed the shift in focus of political and funding agencies from rural community development to agricultural and economic development.

Finally, network leaders felt that there was a need to create better opportunities for partnership working to avoid duplication of effort. Network leaders suggested that networks should move away from 'silo thinking', particularly in the climate of funding cuts.

Network approaches to operating

There was the view among leaders that networks in the future will have to adopt flexible approaches to working. This was discussed in

terms of networks' ability to adapt and respond to change and crisis, particularly in the current financial climate. For example, one participant spoke of the need for community networks to operate flexibly across sectors. It was suggested that this would ensure that local communities were better served, in terms of access to resources, information and best practice. This was illustrated in the need to establish cross-working relations with food producers, local businesses and peer-to-peer support groups. It was suggested that networks have to ensure that they are:

'fit enough to take advantage of the changing context'
Network Leader

Technology

When thinking about the future of networks, leaders felt that technology would play a vital role in the delivery of networking and operational activities. There was the view that the roll-out of broadband across rural communities would improve links between communities, improve access to information and enable e-businesses to operate from remote areas. One network leader suggested that networks in the future should engage in a mixture of online and face-to-face support to build communities' confidence and capacity:

'... [networks in the future will have] a mixture of virtual support and help and good, solid advice, accurate advice right, and virtually, and then backed up by, feet on the ground, visitation, an analysis of what's going on in the various locations and working with ... groups to enable them ... to feel more comfortable and confident and for them to be able to take their own agendas forward'

Network Leader

While there was agreement among leaders that the future of networks lay in a mixture of online and face-to-face engagement with communities, there were cautionary views relating to the over-reliance of networking online. For example, leaders discussed both the need for a cultural shift in terms of engagement within online networking technology and that rural communities had to be connected to broadband facilities. It was felt that only then could a fully online networking structure be established. This was illustrated with an example of a recent survey conducted by one umbrella network which aimed to explore views on community-owned halls. While the survey was available to complete and submit online, 60% of the responses were returned in hard copy. This therefore raises the fact that for many, engaging fully in online activities is not yet possible, either due to broadband reach or due

to a lack of engagement in online technology. There was the view that until both cultural and technological issues were addressed, community organisations would remain dependent upon local level networking.

6.2 Survey respondents suggestions for rural network improvements

The remaining section presents findings from survey respondents. Survey respondents were asked whether there were any ways in which rural networks could improve the services that they offer and if there were additional ways that they could support rural communities. When thinking about improvements, survey respondents' answers were categorised into five main themes:

- information and outputs
- networking
- representation
- facilitation and moderation
- visibility.

Information

While networks provide a wealth of information for their users, when asked if there were any services that respondents would like networks to provide, both users and producers cited 'information'. Responses were categorised into four broad themes:

- Training and employment opportunities within their local communities;
- Advice on funding opportunities;
- Rural policies at local and national levels;
- Engagement in policy discussions and consultations at both local and national levels.

As well as requesting specific information on funding, policy and legal aid for small businesses, respondents suggested that they would value information in online formats such as access to a project databases that held information and contact details for rural networks and community projects within their local area.

Survey respondents reported that they would value physical information points and/or drop-in information clinics within local communities to provide informal face-to-face contact and advice. In particular, producers suggested that rural development networks could facilitate this by utilising local community resources such as community centres, schools and libraries. In addition, both users and producers suggested that they would like rural networks to produce newsletters to inform them of training events, conferences, local projects, local employment opportunities and local policy.

As mentioned, both users and producers referred to the idea of capacity building in terms of the

type of information they would like to receive. While most respondents recognised the value and importance of online resources, there was the view among producers that online activities were often difficult, frustrating and time consuming due to internet access speeds and availability. It was also suggested by users that, at times, they felt overwhelmed by the amount of information that was available online and this should be something that networks consider.

Examples of user and activist responses are detailed in information box 1.

Networking

Users and producers were keen to share learning and best practice. It was suggested that the best way to do this was through networking opportunities. Both users and producers felt that rural networks should engage in, and facilitate, networking opportunities among users and practitioners. Users and producers also mentioned that there was a need for rural networks to host local and national events, conferences, seminars and local meetings. While users requested that rural networks fund and host networking events, producers were more likely to suggest that funding cuts would reduce networks' ability to host and fund such events. Information box 2 presents the key issues in relation to networking.

Information Box 1 – Type of information required

Network Activity	Users	Producers
Newsletters	Tap into local information resources such as local parish, local council newsletters	Outline training opportunities, events, local employment opportunities
Training and employment	Advice on local employment and training opportunities	Deliver training
Policy	Informed engagement with policy to increase awareness of how policy decisions impact rural communities	Engage communities in policy consultations
Project specific information	Database on community groups and their projects – share information and best practice	Database of community development experts willing to offer advice and skills to local groups.
General information	Topical information updates	Develop question/answer bank for rural issues, project development, etc
Information Points	Provide information on funding, legal aid, policy, etc	Information drop-in clinics to provide information, support and advice – provide signposts to the appropriate network

Representation

Similar to networking, producers felt that rural development networks should actively bring rural communities and development networks together to both create a local presence and represent the voice of rural communities on rural issues. Producers felt that rural networks should engage with local groups in relation to rural policy issues and facilitate consultations and coordinated lobbying at both regional and national levels. The main issues raised were:

- Increase rural communities' local voice
- Increase lobbying powers on rural community development issues
- Coordinated lobbying of devolved and UK governments for aligned strategies and policies to enable building resilience of local communities
- Increase rural communities' participation and engage in policy consultations

Facilitation and moderation

Respondents stressed that rural community groups require advice, support, facilitation and moderation from rural development networks. It was thought that facilitation and moderation could be achieved through both online and face-to-face formats (Information box 3). For example, users suggested that they would benefit from:

Information box 2 – Key issues in terms of networking

Network activity	Users	Producers
Hosting events	Promote best practice through holding events locally, local networking – prevent local groups 'reinventing the wheel'	Active forum to bring together rural practitioners across the UK and Ireland
Funding	Develop and fund networking events and conferences	Networking, conference and/or and funding individuals to visit other community projects
Best Practice	Share best practice through hosting local events	Match community development experts to projects and organisations. Match the interests of groups to share best practice
Communication		Improved communication between networks to avoid duplication of effort (prevent reinventing the wheel) Encourage partnership working between organisations to provide joint events and training and to prevent 'stand-alone' groups

- Increased moderation of online discussions
- Informed engagement with policy to increase local awareness of how discussions affect them

Producers discussed ways in which rural development networks could mentor and support rural communities through online and face-to-face resources. In terms of online resources, producers suggested the following:

- An online database of experienced community development practitioners and/or organisations that would be willing to volunteer their skills, expertise and/or advice
- Online seminars for users to access remotely
- Online facilitates to engage with community development experts
- Mentoring from community development experts to enable communities to build their capacity and resilience
- Online question/answer bank populated with responses from community development experts

Visibility

Both users and producers felt that rural community networks were not accessed by all who would benefit from them, simply due to the fact that they were largely unnoticed by members of the general public. The following issues were raised in relation to visibility:

Information box 3 – Facilitation and Moderation

Network Activity	Users	Producers
Knowledge Transfer	Increase awareness of policy	Share best practice on relevant and interesting work, run seminars (online and through face-to-face events)
Moderation	Moderation of online debates and discussions	Moderate debates – problem solving
Capacity building	Capacity building within communities in relation to project development and management	Promote job creation in the local economy. Information points and drop-in clinics for local community (libraries, church halls, community centres)
Mentoring		Mentoring by professional community development workers to enable communities to build capacity and resilience. Match experts who wish to offer their skills and experience to projects.

- Signposting
- Increasing profile of rural networks
- Increasing profile of rural initiatives

Respondents felt that rural networks should focus on targeted awareness campaigns in order to raise both the profile of their organisation and the profile of rural issues. In particular, producers felt that networks should engage in awareness-raising campaigns as opposed to ‘raising

campaigns as opposed to speaking to the same converted people’ (survey participant).

Furthermore, respondents suggested that it was be hugely beneficial if networks were able to provide a ‘sign-posting’ facility or a bank of existing organisations and community groups that would increase users’ awareness of existing networks that they could approach for support and advice.

6.3 Supporting local communities

Survey respondents' views on the ways that rural networks can support their local communities were broadly similar to their views on the types of services that they felt would benefit their users (see section 6.2). For instance, responses broadly fell into the following categories: accessibility and visibility; representation, engagement and collaboration; and funding and evaluation.

Accessibility and Visibility

Users and producers suggested that rural networks can support communities by raising the profile and increasing awareness of existing networks. The main issues around access and visibility were reported in terms of:

- increasing awareness of existing networks
- maximise internet presence
- access to new technologies
- know where to access information

One way that visibility could be improved was suggested to be through the development of a centralised list of networks and their functions that users could access. Users and producers also felt that rural networks should maximise their internet presence and engage with social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter to publicise successful community projects. However, while respondents recognised the importance of online activities, there was a

degree of concern among producers in terms of access. Producers suggested that those who do not or cannot access new technologies will be at risk of being left behind, which would have disastrous consequences for the communities they represent.

Producers further suggested that the work of non-governmental organisations goes largely unrecognised by government bodies. There was the view among producers that rural networks should engage in more joined-up working to enable them to raise the profile of the work they are engaged. Pooling resources was also viewed as being a means of improving communication links with users as information could be streamlined.

Users also felt that there were too many networks in existence. This made it confusing in terms of knowing what sources of information to access and there was a view that networks were duplicating efforts. One user suggested that a large number of networks succeeded in:

'... generating much noise but little light [with] too many people talking to themselves'

Survey participant

Representation

There was the view among users and producers that rural networks should integrate more within the communities that they represent. When

discussing this, users' and producers' responses were categorised into increasing democracy within local communities and engagement in local communities, and funding and evaluation.

Increasing democracy within local communities

Respondents suggested that because rural networks are locally based, networks possess the ability to keep rural issues on the political agenda, which in turn increases democracy. The following points were raised by users and producers:

- Keeping rural issues on the political map (locally, nationally, and internationally)
- Ensuring that local communities have a voice
- Challenge and influence

Users and producers suggested that rural networks are able to support local communities by ensuring that they have a voice at local, national and international levels. Indeed, there was the view among producers that local networks should link with national networks who possess the ability to raise and discuss rural issues at a national and European level.

Both users and producers felt that rural networks could support their rural communities by enhancing the voice of locals. Among users, it was suggested networks could achieve this by acting as a mediating voice between local groups and Local Authorities.

Furthermore, in terms of increasing the democracy within communities, producers suggested that networks could encourage and support local communities to become involved in discussions and decision-making processes that directly affect their rural communities. However, while both producers and users reported the need for greater engagement in decision-making processes, producers reported a degree of concern when thinking about their capacity to influence local authority decisions. For instance, it was highlighted that while rural networks were confident in their ability to challenge local decision making, there was the view that consultations are ‘one-way’ which impacts on networks’ ability to influence the outcome of the decision making process.

Engagement and collaboration

There was a view among both users and producers that rural networks should engage with the local communities that they represent. Users felt that networks could increase their ‘local presence’ by integrating with local community groups to gain an understanding of what is happening ‘on the ground’. In addition, there was the view that networks could engage in a number of collaborative partnerships such as:

- Engage in cross-sector activities
- Establish stronger links with parishes, villages and towns (utilise existing sources of information)
- Develop new and innovative practices

Producers suggested that networks should increase their involvement in cross-sector activities to enable them to share learning and also adopt new approaches to working. In order to develop new methods of working and to increase community involvement in rural networks, users and producers suggested that networks could collaborate with innovative members of the community to develop community projects and initiatives; engage with ‘learning hubs’ such as schools, colleges and universities; link with librarians to inform and signpost. A final means of improving links within communities was through the development of stronger bonds with local authorities, parish councils and villages. It was felt that networks could utilise Parish and village newsletters to in order to inform locals and raise the profile of the work that they are engaged in.

Funding and Evaluation

Producers discussed the lack of funding for rural community networks as having a detrimental effect upon communities. When discussing funding and the ways that rural networks could support communities, a number of issues were raised:

- Networking
- Transfer of learning and best practice
- Evaluation of best practice

Users and producers suggested that funding cuts would have a negative impact on the availability of networking opportunities.

Producers felt that networks would no longer be able to fund and/or host events for community groups and voluntary organisations.

Producers suggested that the decrease in networking opportunities would result in a vast reduction of partnership working among and between communities. It was therefore suggested that local groups and communities would find it difficult to share learning and best practice. In turn, there was the view among users that funders should recognise the value in networking and provide adequate financial support to encourage and facilitate face-to-face meetings and events at local and national levels.

Furthermore, users suggested that in an era of financial cuts, communities required evidence-based initiatives. Respondents felt that rural community networks should engage in and inform their users of evidence-based best practice. Users also suggested that networks should assess their own existence and not simply exist for the sake of it or as:

‘a response to further a political agenda rather than supporting the needs of a small scale cause’

Survey participant

Chapter 7

Conclusion



7 Conclusion

This study, based upon respondent data and desk-based analysis of rural development network websites, has provided a snapshot of the key issues facing rural development networks the UK and Ireland. In undertaking this piece of work, this study has created a geographical typology of networks using organisations identified in the responses of survey participants. The study has also outlined why people access networks and has highlighted the benefits of using rural networks in terms of users' confidence in tackling rural community development issues.

Our typology found that networks operated at local, national and cross/international levels. In addition, our typology classified networks in terms of their governance ie non-government organisations, government organisations and other (ie academic institutions and private sector organisations). Using 232 organisations identified from the responses of survey participants, we found that that a larger proportion of networks named in the survey worked across both urban and rural dimension than those with a specific rural focus and the range of issues covered by networks was varied and broad ranging. Despite finding no substantive differences in the reasons why

participants accessed rural development networks, we found that the three most common reasons why participants used rural networks was to obtain advice and information, to identify sources of funding and to share local learning and experiences.

The study highlighted the concerns of network leaders and survey respondents in terms of a perceived distinction between agricultural, economic rural development and rural community development. Indeed, this distinction was felt to have profound implications for the future direction of networks. For instance, the perceived focus upon agriculture and economic development has resulted in a climate of uncertainty among both network leaders and survey respondents. This finding was reiterated by the fact that half of survey respondents classified as producers were 'not very' or 'not at all' confident in their organisation's capacity to influence national policy on rural development issues.

Similarly, while there is growing pressure for communities to take on a greater role in the ownership of assets, our findings show that survey respondents (both users and providers)

were least confident in their ability to bid to take over services, negotiate with land-owners to take on community assets or own local community assets.

When thinking about the services that rural networks offer, this report has shown that users and producers access rural development networks to find out about funding, to receive support and advice for social enterprises, and to find out about environmental, food and energy issues. Users of networks were extremely positive when thinking about the type of services that rural networks offer. For example, rural networks not only provided users with the opportunity to foster partnerships, engage in networking and increase the voice of local communities, but they also increased users' confidence when carrying out these activities.

All networks, regardless of type, provided a range of information, networking, training and conferencing opportunities, which was valued by their users and members. Networks also engaged in a variety of communication tools most notably, social networking featured highly among discussions with most network leaders. Those networks that had begun to engage in social networking media had experienced

extremely successful results in terms of communicating and engaging with members. While interactive websites were viewed as something that networks ideally would like to adopt, most network leaders felt that social media technology was helping them to bridge the communication and engagement gap.

In addition, the research found that technological advancements had enabled rural development networks to extend their reach and improve communications with users. As individuals move from face-to-face contact to social media, the costs of running networks have and will reduce. The study also found that survey participants and network leaders viewed social media as a tool to enable networks to both raise the profile of their work and increase their visibility.

However, while there was support for the shift towards operating online, network providers were cautious to move entirely to online networking due to concerns over digital exclusion. There was recognition that members of rural communities may be excluded from information if networks move solely to online networking. Furthermore, survey respondents felt that they would like more face-to-face encounters with the networks they engage with. These face-to-face encounters could take the form of information drop-ins in local community centres or village halls.

A prominent finding of this report has been the recognition among networks leaders and survey respondents of the importance of partnership working among networks. Network leaders and survey participants viewed partnership working as a way of increasing the lobbying power of networks and the communities they represent.

The study found that there is a proliferation of networks in existence and this has resulted in a complex and confusing landscape for users. Partnership working was therefore viewed as a way to prevent duplication of effort and increase effectiveness and efficiencies. Study participants also viewed partnership working as being a key element that would both ensure the sustainability of networks and improve users' access to information.

Recommendations

This study has therefore outlined a number of emerging issues for the future sustainability and direction of rural development networks across the UK and Ireland. The report has also presented a range of key findings that may be used to influence policy on rural issues.

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.

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.

Andrew Carnegie House

Pittencrieff Street
Dunfermline
KY12 8AW

Tel: +44 (0)1383 721445

Fax: +44 (0)1383 749799

Email: info@carnegieuk.org

www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk

This report was written by Martine Miller and Jennifer Wallace

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