

**“Talking is not a waste of time”
Networks and the Co-ordination of Area-based
initiatives.**

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1. Introduction

The issue of coordination and collaboration between public services and government departments is a “perennial problem” (Webb, 1991; Kavanagh and Richards, 2001). Since 1997 there has been increased interest in the issues of ‘joined-up government’ and how to deal with cross-cutting issues such as social exclusion (Rhodes, 2000b; DETR, 1999a; Taylor, 2000). In the last three years the UK Government has launched several area-based initiatives which aim to tackle social exclusion and neighbourhood regeneration. All demand a partnership structure and a collaborative, multi-agency approach. Each individual initiative has objectives relating to issues such as unemployment, health, community safety and education. These Area-Based Initiatives (ABIs) with their respective partnerships are often clustered in the same area, often superimposed one on top of the other and can create confusion and duplication of effort at local, regional and national level. The proliferation of such initiatives has raised questions about their co-ordination.

The local governance structures in the UK are becoming increasingly complex with layers of strategies, partnerships and area-based structures. The Local Government Act (DETR, 1998) has led to Local Government reorganisation and the development of devolved structures of power to local communities. Alongside this process there is a requirement for local government to develop Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) (DETR, 2001) to oversee Community Planning processes and Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies. The NHS Act (DoH, 1997) has created Primary Care Groups (soon to be Trusts) which aim to provide more localised decision-making and implementation of services. Policies and strategies are being developed at different spatial levels– national, regional, sub-regional, local and neighbourhood and it is difficult enough to keep track of these developments let alone the linkages between them. Local areas are struggling to manage this process and to keep on top of the policy direction and guidance. It is impossible for everybody to know everything that is going on and networks have become an important way of exchanging knowledge.

People and networks are often the key to co-ordination and collaboration (DETR, 2000). The number of ‘co-ordinators’ (people whose job is to co-ordinate organisations and people) is constantly multiplying. These co-ordinators are employed by ABIs but also by the statutory/mainstream partnerships and agencies. For co-ordinators and for other service deliverers and agencies there is a constant need to look beyond their own professional boundaries and expertise and to understand the wider picture and make connections outside their own area. There is a growing acceptance of the links between professions and the need to be aware of cross-cutting issues. However, the increase in activity is putting pressure on people’s daily working lives and often local authority, health authority and voluntary sector employees are expected to do extra work on top of their normal job (for example, to put bids in for extra funding, to attend more partnership meetings) and some are at saturation point. Those on the lower rungs of their organisation’s hierarchy, do not get time to stop and take stock of what their work is about or to consider their work as part of a wider context. For this reason the network, where people exchange information can be invaluable, as one interviewee stated:

“It is a talking shop – but talking is not a waste of time”

This paper is based on research commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions into the co-ordination of area-based initiatives in six localities in England. The research has highlighted three ways in which the co-ordination of initiatives can be pursued - strategy, networking and delivery (DETR, 1999b and 2000). Networking is just one way of co-ordinating and collaborating and there are several types of networks which have been explored - interpersonal, technology based and themed.

In this paper the focus is on interpersonal networks as a method of co-ordination. It discusses two case studies in Rotherham¹ (South Yorkshire) and Smethwick in Sandwell (West Midlands)². In both Sandwell and Rotherham deprivation and unemployment is spread fairly widely throughout the boroughs. Both places have several ABIs including Single Regeneration Budget, Sure Start, New Start, Health Action Zone, Crime Reduction Programme and Sandwell also has an Education Action Zone, CLSP and New Deal for Communities. Both areas are developing local government structures in line with the Local Government Act (DETR, 1998), and have created area structures (Town Committees in Sandwell, Area Assemblies in Rotherham), Borough Cabinets and Local Strategic Partnerships.

The research findings are the result of work carried out with two networks – the Rotherham Co-ordinating Group (RCG) and the Smethwick Local Officer Network (SLON). The RCG is a network of 15 people who are Co-ordinators of ABIs, other partnerships or are council officers in charge of external funding and ABIs. They meet about 3 times a year and the group was initiated and is facilitated by the Rotherham Partnership (which acts as the LSP, co-ordinating regeneration and sub-partnerships on health, lifelong learning, community safety, community involvement and economic development). The SLON is a network of approximately 30 officers from the council, the health authority, local Smethwick Regeneration Partnership, Primary Care Group and the voluntary sector. The network meets once a month and was established as part of Sandwell council's process of 'modernisation' and move to more area-based working, it is Chaired and administered by council officers. Both groups act primarily as information exchange bodies.

The rest of the paper falls into four parts - a review of the network literature, research methodology, empirical evidence and conclusions focussing on what makes networks work.

¹ Rotherham in South Yorkshire is one of three South Yorkshire Coalfield boroughs and like its counterparts Doncaster and Barnsley, Rotherham has suffered as a result of the loss of the coal mining and steel industries. The Coalfield boroughs attract additional government funding and the whole of South Yorkshire has now received Objective 1 status from the European Union, a status which, it is hoped will revitalise investment and the South Yorkshire economy.

² Sandwell created from six small towns in the West Midlands is one of the four Black Country boroughs. It is characterised by its historic dependence on manufacturing and now by long term unemployment, poor environmental conditions of derelict land, obsolescent building and major transport routes, and widespread deprivation throughout the borough. Areas are mixed in terms of usage - industrial and residential and population, with wide range of ethnic groups. Smethwick is one of the six towns and is situated in the South East of Sandwell, adjacent to Birmingham. It has a high percentage of ethnic minorities (almost 50%). It also has a local Regeneration Partnership funded by the Single Regeneration Budget which has created a strategy for Smethwick and acts as temporary management to Sure Start.

2. Characteristics of networks

Networks, hierarchies and markets are seen as three basic modes of governance; three ways of co-ordinating social life (Thompson et al, 1991; Rhodes, 1997). These modes of governance are not mutually exclusive but interact and co-exist (Bradach and Eccles, 1991; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Skelcher et al, 1996) yet it is networks which are emerging as the way to confront complex and intractable social problems (Jackson and Stainsby, 2000; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). Networks enable people to find out what is going on in an area, to share knowledge and expertise, gain mutual support and to make links and co-ordinate activity.

Networks are characterised by informal relationships which operate on the basis of trust and reciprocity (Thompson, 1991), they “*conjure up the idea of the idea of informal relationships between essentially equal social agents and agencies*” (Thompson et al, 1991) but the reality can be very different from this ideal. As Lowndes and Skelcher explain:

“The co-operation and mutuality implied by the ideal-typical network mode of governance can too easily be read on to actually existing organisations, fostering assumptions of pluralism and benign state action.”³

It is not sufficient to know that networks are being used for co-ordination and collaboration, we also need to know why they exist and how they operate (Thompson et al, 1991). Research into networks needs to contextualise the network and explore its role and the relationship it has with formal structures (John, 1998). Research also needs to consider the basis of individual relationships particularly concentrating on trust and power (John 1998; Dowding 1995; Skelcher et al, 1996). The next two sections discuss these issues in turn.

2.1 The Role of the Network

People and organisations join networks to collaborate in some way. The term collaboration can be replaced by a number of terms both positive (co-operation, co-ordination, coalition) and negative (collusion, competition) (Huxham, 1996). There are many rationales for collaboration and these can change over time. It is essential to ensure constant clarity about the role and purpose of the network. People need to know what they are a part of and why. Himmelman sees networking as the first step on a continuum to collaboration:

“At one extreme, he defines networking as ‘the exchange of information for mutual benefit’. At the other extreme he defines collaboration as ‘exchange of information, altering activities, sharing resources and enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose’.”⁴

³ Lowndes, V. and Skelcher, C. (1998) ‘The Dynamics of Multi-organisational Partnerships: An analysis of Changing Modes of Governance.’ *Public Administration*, Vol. 76, Summer.

⁴ Himmelman quoted in the Introduction to Huxham, C. (1996) *Creating Collaborative Advantage*. London: Sage.

Jackson and Stainsby (2000) suggest that networking implies the pursuit of common goals for mutual benefit and therefore:

“Both co-operation and competition acknowledge the pursuit of individual goals. They do not, therefore, reflect the nature of networks except in the weakest sense of the word, meaning pattern of relationships. The concept of the network... is more usefully thought of as incorporating the notions of co-ordination and co-evolution.”⁵

The role of a network changes and develops over time and is dependent on the context in which it operates (John, 1998). In particular the relationship of the network to more formal structures of governance can influence its role.

“... everything affects everything else. Thus network structures can affect how institutions work and the way political actors make choices; but institutions in turn structure how networks function...”⁶

Individual members, therefore, can be constrained in networks by the hierarchical organisation to which they belong, issues of accountability and autonomy need to be considered and dealt with, which means that networks inevitably have to compromise and bridge the gap between action and discussion (Huxham, 1996). The next section deals with the relationships between individual members of the network which inevitably raises issues of trust and power.

2.2 Trust and Power

The structure of the network rests on the connections between individual members. These can be relations based on 'sentiment' relations (respect, affection, hostility, shared history), on authority and power or on 'instrumental' relations (members contacting one another to gather information, secure resources) (Knoke and Kuklinski, 1991). Networks are viewed as informal with members joining voluntarily for the common good. Networks depend on mutuality and trusting relationships (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Thompson, 1991; John, 1998).

“The network mode of governance arises from a view that actors are able to identify complementary interests. The development of interdependent relationships based on trust, loyalty and reciprocity enables collaborative activity to be developed and maintained.”⁷

Trust is a significant feature in the network literature and is thought to be the key to the development of networking. When we trust someone we:

“... implicitly mean that the probability that he [or she] will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of co-operation with him [or her].”⁸

It is assumed in networks that the more the members trust each other the more dense networks become and decisions get made quicker (John, 1998). However, in their discussion of trust and power Hardy et al (1998) state that often:

⁵ Jackson, P.M. and Stainsby, L. (2000) 'Managing Public Sector Networked Organisations.' *Public Money and Management*, January-March.

⁶ John, P. (1998) *Analysing Public Policy*. London: Pinter

⁷ Lowndes, V. and Skelcher, C. (1998) 'The Dynamics of Multi-organisational Partnerships: An analysis of Changing Modes of Governance.' *Public Administration*, Vol. 76, Summer, pp318

⁸ Gambetta's definition of trust quoted in Bradach and Eccles (1991)

“power can be hidden behind a façade of ‘trust’ and a rhetoric of ‘collaboration’ and can be used to promote vested interests through the manipulation and capitulation of weaker partners.”

This links to the idea that there is always a risk of opportunism inherent in trust (Bradach and Eccles, 1991) and thus networks can be used as a tool to sustain unequal power relationships. Networks can be elusive, exclusive and create suspicion about certain élites being ‘in the know’, the Mafia is the example most used in the literature to illustrate the downside of highly effective networking (Skelcher et al, 1996; Thompson et al, 1991).

Networks rely less on structure and more on informal interaction, but networks are not entirely unstructured. There are nodes (individuals or organisations) which facilitate (or perhaps hinder) the flow of information and bridges across which information must flow and which in turn can make movement easier (by bridging gaps) or more difficult (by narrowing the channels through which contacts flow) (DETR, 2000). It is important to recognise that networks reflect existing power structures and that some individuals can control not only the flow of information but control the membership of the network itself.

Social network literature develops ways of mapping important individuals within networks (Dowding, 1995), and (policy) network analysis in part concentrates on exploring the power relationships within networks and the discovery of powerful ‘insiders’ and marginalised ‘outsiders’ (Skelcher et al, 1996; Dowding, 1995). Researching networks can be difficult since often it is not always clear where networks begin and end and relationships are constantly changing. Dowding summarises the complex nature of these relationships (where resources in the context of this paper can be taken to mean money, information or joint histories):

“The power of members is dependent upon the powers of other members given the relationship between them. Similarly the type of relationship members have will be dependent upon their resources.”⁹

⁹ Dowding, K. (1995) Model or Metaphor? A Critical review of the Policy Network Approach. *Political Studies*, XLIII: 136-158, pp. 153

3. Networks: an Action Research Approach

Research in Rotherham and Sandwell began when researchers and the convenors of the network identified that the networks would benefit from action research which would focus on their future development. At the outset of the research the two networks were in a state of inertia. As was seen in the previous sections networks are complex, members' reasons for being involved in collaborative activity often differ, the context in which they operate is constantly changing and time is needed to develop shared understandings, common goals and trust. For these reasons action research seems to be a particularly useful tool for the research into and development of networks. Through a process of action research the researcher is able to help members to come to an understanding of how their network works and of the various expectations each member has and help to reconcile these expectations and reach agreements about the aims and future of the network. In action research the researcher's role is:

"Not that of an expert who does research, but that of a resource person. He or she becomes a facilitator or consultant who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work towards effective solutions to the issues that concern them."¹⁰

The research began in Rotherham with attendance at two Rotherham Co-ordinating Group (RCG) meetings, where researchers observed proceedings, presented findings from the DETR research project (DETR, 1999b and 2000) and initiated a discussion based on some of the themes coming out of the project - networking, area-based working, mainstreaming, indicators and evaluation. The group decided and agreed that further research would be beneficial, so the researchers then formulated a questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on the main themes which were developed during the meeting on good and bad points of networking, mainstreaming and area based working, and also based on wider network research literature (particularly Skelcher et al. 1996). Interviews were held with all members of the RCG using a structured questionnaire which included questions like:

- What are the most important benefits of the network?
- What are the most important disbenefits of the network?
- How clear are you about the aim of the network?
- Who do you trust the most?
- Who do you like the most?
- Who are the most important people in the network?
- If you could add two people to the network who would you add? Who would they replace?
- What is the role of the network in mainstreaming and area-based working?
- How would you like the network to develop?

Some of the questions are sensitive questions and yet all interviewees were willing to share their answers. Perhaps the difficulty would have been if the interviewees had been asked the corresponding negative questions - Who don't you trust? Who don't you like?

¹⁰ Stringer, E. T. (1996) *Action Research: A handbook for Practitioners*. London: Sage, pp. 22

The researchers analysed the responses, mapped the relationships diagrammatically (see figure 1, page 15) and developed options for the development of the network which were then fed back to the group and discussed collectively. It was agreed that the researchers would write up the notes of this discussion to form a draft terms of reference to be discussed in the next meeting. At the next meeting, following discussion, a consensus was reached about the future role and format of the group and its meetings. This was achieved in the first half of the meeting and the researchers were able to observe the second half.

In Smethwick the process was slightly different due to time-scales. The researcher had initial discussions with the Chair and Administrator of the Smethwick Local Officer Network (SLON) and was invited to attend and observe the first meeting and present the idea of action research. Members of the group agreed that research would be useful and interviews (using a questionnaire fairly similar to the Rotherham one) were carried out with about a third of the members. Findings have not yet been fed back to the group due to cancellation of the last meeting. The research process in Smethwick was slightly less satisfactory than in Rotherham and highlights the need for Action Research to be done with the full support and knowledge of the group members, with adequate time allocated.

4. The Networks Observed

Discussion of the empirical evidence collected on the two networks again falls in two parts. The first concentrates on the role of the network and includes the relationship between the network and more formal structures. The second section looks more at the personal relationships between members focussing on issues of trust and power.

4.1 The Role of the Network

In both networks there was a mixed view on the clarity of aims of the group although interviews showed there was a general consensus that both were primarily about information exchange. Sharing information, co-ordinating activities, making links with other initiatives (and people) were listed overall as the most important benefits of the groups. People had varying expectations in terms of whether the network should be purely about sharing information and talking or should be more proactive and strategic with concrete outputs and outcomes.

In both groups the most important disbenefit was that 'attendance was patchy', this was either linked to the issue of others not taking the network seriously or in Smethwick with the network taking up 'valuable time'. This also has to be set in a context where people are often involved in their own 'specialist' or 'ABI' networks and where there is sometimes a feeling that there are already too many networks (which often have overlapping membership and are layered at different spatial and hierarchical levels). The two networks were not a top priority for all the members. People have to make a judgement about where their time is best spent. It is particularly difficult to interest those people who do not want simply to attend a 'talking shop' but who want to get on, do things and influence policy and strategy. In Rotherham the attitude was that if people did not agree that the group was worthwhile then they would "vote with their feet" and not attend. This was already happening in Smethwick. During discussions in Rotherham the point was made that continual review of the benefits and membership of the group should be carried out to keep a check on the relevance of the group.

The dilemma in both groups was the role of the network. Both had established and agreed the need for information sharing but often members questioned whether this was enough to sustain the network and attendance. It was thought that the value of a 'talking-shop' might diminish over time as people built relationships and had less need to meet face-to-face. The questions raised, therefore, were - should it develop from talking into action and form a more strategic body which tries to influence policy direction? Did it have the opportunity to do this within the given structures?

In Rotherham a more strategic, influential role was not seen as the main priority but was also not ruled out. The three options for future development of the group revolved in part around the relationship of the network to the Rotherham Strategic Partnership:

Option 1 Abolition: The RCG is wound up since *"it has served its purpose"*

Option 2 Co-existence: the Management Group and the RCG co-exist since most people feel the group is beneficial but *"it is at a crossroads"* and needs to consider its role, membership and format of meetings.

Option 3 Merger: The RCG and Management Group merge since there is already overlap of members between the two groups and they could be more effective by merging.

Option 2 was chosen and it was agreed that the structure of future meetings would be workshops and discussion (about particular themes relevant to members) and if members felt that it was worth taking the information forward then that would be done. The RCG has a rather ad hoc approach since it was felt that the network should be kept for and run by the members rather than having to do work for the Partnership and its members. Members wanted to keep it as an independent group but acknowledged that there were connections already there (in the form of overlapping membership). In the final meeting the RCG agreed on a number of objectives for the group which could also be interpreted as principles on which the group acted.

Role of the RCG - CLASS principles and objectives

Co-ordination Linking area based initiatives and partnerships together. Co-ordinators should feed information into and out of the Co-ordinating Group.

Learning Collective learning about relevant issues, e.g. mainstreaming, evaluation, co-ordination skills, South Yorkshire wide issues.

Advisory Advisory Group to the Management Group, e.g. informing new bids.

Sharing Information sharing about the various area based initiatives and partnerships.

Support Provide a mutually supportive group for Co-ordinators.

In Smethwick the situation is slightly different in that from the outset the SLON has been part of the structures set up to 'modernise local government'. The network is unsure of its role, since there is a feeling it is supposed to be linked to formal structures (Town Committee and Community Forum) but these links have not been made clear. As a result the SLON is struggling and appears to lack the capacity and ability to find its own direction. It seems to have difficulty asserting itself as a group and making links with structures, although this appears to be the direction it wants to take. There is the perception that it has little influence and so is limited to talking and exchanging information.

Rotherham Co-ordinating Group as a self-organising independent network, can choose whether to engage with formal structures or not, but the perception is that the door is open and if it wanted influence it could have it. The Smethwick LON is in a contrasting situation, set up by the council (senior officers), it is struggling to carve out a role for itself other than as an information exchange and yet wants to be more influential in terms of delivery of services in Smethwick.

4.2 Trust and Power

On the basis of the research questionnaire a picture of the relationships between the members of the networks can be built up. Through the research the researchers wanted to give the members an idea of the relationships within the networks to illustrate the different positions of individuals within the network and also to give an idea of what relationships are needed in order for a network to function. We mapped the reciprocal relationships diagrammatically (see figure 1).

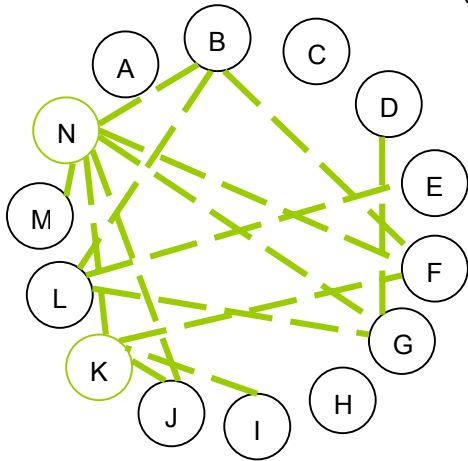
Working relationships between group members are well developed in most cases. Most representatives already meet with others in different contexts and display a high degree of trust and mutuality between each other. So levels of trust are quite high and these benefits are reinforced by having a number of long term actors who have worked together in the past.

In Rotherham there was the perception that the Group was no longer needed because everyone knew each other. This was not so in reality, as the research demonstrated, there were people who were on the periphery of the network (because they were new to the area, to the job or to the network) for whom the RCG was a valuable source of information. The importance of networks is that people coming new into the area in particular roles/agencies can tap into a network which draws together a lot of the relevant people.

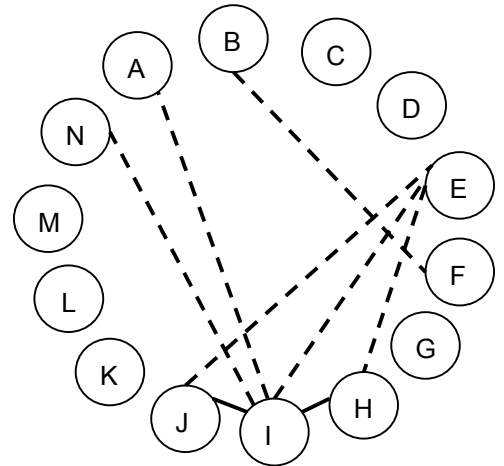
Networks can be exclusive, there are nodes of information - people who are central to the network - and there are those on the periphery who are not keyed into several networks or have strong interpersonal links with others in the group. In general there is quite a lot of contact between members both by phone and at other work meetings. But it is significant that some RCG members are isolated or peripheral (see C, D and M in figure 1) and this was mostly because they were new to the group or because of their position in the partnership structures. They were often Co-ordinators of statutory partnerships (which are relatively new compared to ABIs) and so perhaps moved in slightly different networks more directly connected to their area of work. These partnerships compared to the ABIs are also relatively new.

Figure 1: Relationships in Rotherham

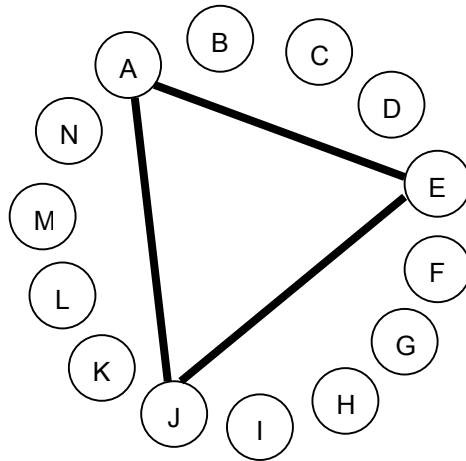
Who do you have the most contact with at other work meetings?



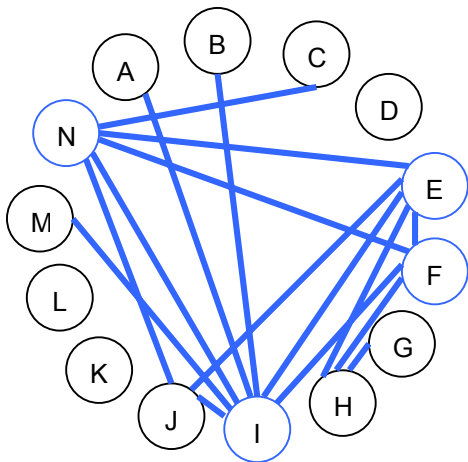
Who do you trust the most?



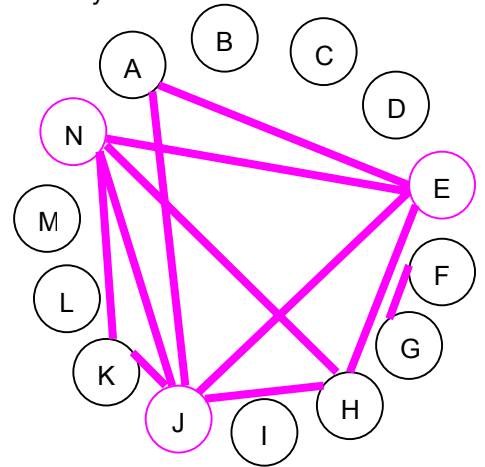
Who do you have most contact with socially or outside work?



Who can you most do business with?



Who do you like the most?



Hardly anyone in the networks socialised with each other. Only three interviewees in Rotherham said they socialised with each other although this did not mean that they trusted each other the most nor could most do business with each other as might perhaps be expected (see A, E and J in figure 1). People who work in the same offices tend to have well developed

relationships and tend to trust each other, like each other and are able to do business with each other. This may be partly due to proximity, partly due to working in similar professions or areas of work (e.g. Single Regeneration Budget Co-ordinators, Planning Officers in the Local Authority) which open up more opportunities to get to know each other and work together (see A, E, H, I, J, N).

The people who were felt to be the most important members of the group were generally those who organised the meetings and took the role of either Chair, facilitator or administrator (see I in figure 1). These people were often the ones who were trusted by the most people, and who were thought to be the people that most people could do business with. This is perhaps understandable since networks often have a 'linking pin' (Skelcher et al., 1996).

Through observation of the meetings, it was possible to explore further the relationships and positions of members. In Rotherham members exchanged information. One of the members on the periphery of the group (several interviewees stated they did not really know this member) shared information which three other members found of particular interest and wished to follow up after the meeting. She changed from being an outsider to an insider (someone more visible and recognisable) because of information she gave. In doing this she gave others the opportunity to exchange information about their initiatives and seize upon the chance to gain more funding, improve upon or extend the work they are already doing. Similarly, in Smethwick a presentation on community safety prompted interest from four members, who for several reasons wanted to follow the issue up outside the meeting. These reasons included the possibility for co-ordination between different budgets and projects, the possibility of reducing contradictions and duplication between differing departments and organisations' strategy and delivery. The above examples from the research show that the position of individual members can change because of the length of time in the group, policy changes and shifting priorities and funding opportunities.

7. Conclusions - What can be learnt about how networks work?

Organisations are operating in a complex policy environment and it is difficult to keep track of what is happening. At a time when everyone is working to the limits of their capacity, having to deal with an excessive amount of work there is a need for time to discuss and think. Networks which meet regularly can give the opportunity to step back from an initiative, department or organisation and find out what others working in the same geographical area are doing.

Communication is the key to networking and co-ordination and this means that communication is important within networks but also outwards to the members' own organisations and other networks. In Rotherham this can be done because of the role of the members in flexible, new initiatives or because of the level of members in the hierarchy of the council or Rotherham Partnership. In Smethwick it is not so easy for members due to the lower position of officers in the hierarchy of the council and the internal workings of the council which do not always ensure that information filters down the hierarchy nor vertically within and across departments.

Communication is also essential for building relationships between members and building up trust, mutuality and reciprocity. Rewarding relationships can be built by long term working together, a gut instinct, office proximity or shared funding opportunities. Continual development of the network is necessary and regular reviews should be carried out examining whether the network is needed or whether it has lost its role and should be wound up or altered. Networks can continuously evolve as can structures around them so it is important to keep clarifying the relationship to formal structures. It is important that membership is also continually reviewed to ensure that the network does not become exclusive and people coming new into the area should be briefed clearly about the purpose of the group. Finally, the tension between the desire for action and the need to talk should be reconciled. One lesson which can be learnt from this network research is that *"talking is not a waste of time"* but that it is essential that the talking has a purpose.

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