

# GUIDESHEET

## Community of Practice

### What is a Community of Practice (CoP)?

It is a learning forum where a group of peers willingly come together to develop expertise in a chosen area of practice that will support work on strategic areas.

### How does this happen?

This happens through:

- ⇒ Sharing experiences (credible information, insights, successes, challenges)
- ⇒ Building a specific knowledge base
- ⇒ Developing and implementing new ideas and approaches
- ⇒ Finding creative solutions
- ⇒ Evaluating outcomes.

### What are the Benefits of establishing a 'Community of Practice' for members, associated agencies and projects?

- ⇒ Contributes to better and more informed decisions and outcomes
- ⇒ Provides an opportunity for experimenting with new ideas and approaches
- ⇒ Facilitates information sharing, particularly where the body of knowledge is still developing and not easily accessed
- ⇒ Increasing access to expertise across the geographical area
- ⇒ Helping all those involved in your chosen field to do their jobs more effectively by improving understanding of better practice and innovation in their field
- ⇒ Identifying and promoting best practice which can be re-used by practitioners in similar work roles
- ⇒ Improving problem solving capabilities in your chosen field, across your geographical area

- ⇒ Improving skills and competencies of individual members
- ⇒ Increasing opportunities to pro-actively raise issues with relevant forums
- ⇒ Encouraging strategic alignment with all those involved in your chosen field and other relevant professionals.

### Types of Communities of Practice

#### *Problem solving communities*

Communities that bring together expertise from a variety of sources to focus on solving a common problem.

#### *Knowledge sharing communities*

Communities that build a specific knowledge base in key areas to develop shared information processes and focuses on filling knowledge gaps. This involves acquiring new knowledge and collating, organising and distributing existing knowledge that their members use every day.

#### *Better Practice communities*

Communities that focus on developing, testing and disseminating specific practices. A structured vetting process is created through sharing documented practices.

#### *Innovation communities*

Communities that are based around technical or professional peer groups, identifying new and emerging areas of knowledge where there may be the opportunity to gain an edge and provides the basis for rapid dissemination of new ideas or products.

### How to create a Community of Practice

At the heart of developing a CoP is the 'action learning' method. This involves creating an ongoing 'learning circle', which cultivates innovation and creativity, as participants actively build a trusting CoP and support where each can share insights, success, confusion and challenges.

## The Learning Circle Approach

- ⇒ Build common intent among group participants. Stop and listen to others and what life calls us to do as a group around your chosen field.
- ⇒ Observe, Observe, Observe. See deeply, sharply and collectively.
- ⇒ Reflect on learning and action. Let go of old ideas and be open to new possibilities.
- ⇒ Putting new ideas into action. Be living examples of innovation.
- ⇒ Evaluate; What has worked?, What has not worked? What have we learnt? And what has made a difference?

## How do we learn together?

### Regular meetings

- ⇒ To share learning and insights
- ⇒ To propose new action approaches
- ⇒ To reflect on experiences

### Training and Learning Events

- ⇒ Asset mapping

- ⇒ Using Circles of Support
- ⇒ Community Development
- ⇒ Innovative Practices across your chosen field
- ⇒ Social Inclusion

### Learning Journeys

- ⇒ Visiting innovative projects in your chosen field
- ⇒ Participating in learning events
- ⇒ Visiting innovative projects in other sectors

### Experimenting with New Ideas

- ⇒ Create living examples of doing something that works
- ⇒ Adopt the 'strength based' approach to your chosen field
- ⇒ Ready, Fire, Aim: Learn by Doing

### Individual Consultation

- ⇒ Set up one to one meetings with other relevant organisations to develop supportive relationships to progress more strength based approaches across your chosen field.

# Establishing a Community of Practice



Diagram 1: The phases involved in setting up a Community of Practice

The follow checklist is provided to assist in establish and manage agency relationships with a Community of Practice over the course of its lifecycle.

## **STARTING PHASE**

### ***Choosing an area of Practice***

- ⇒ Identify a topic that is in line with the priorities of the participating agencies, and broader policy directions
- ⇒ Is there is a pre-existing community of practice or forum in the chosen topic?
- ⇒ Is the topic the domain of another agency?
- ⇒ Is there facilitation support available especially to assist in the early stages of the group?
- ⇒ Is a 'community of practice' the appropriate response or should other responses be considered e.g. Workshop, Seminar, Consultative Group, or Policy Forum?

### ***Identify appropriate Membership***

Members can be drawn from across a wide range of agencies/projects and tiers of government.

- ⇒ Explain the scope of a CoP prior to inviting members to join so prospective members can self-select on the basis of its relevance to them
- ⇒ Determine the level of demand and need for knowledge and capacity building in the particular topic area by potential members
- ⇒ The willingness and capacity of potential members to contribute to supporting the group
- ⇒ The level of knowledge and expertise of members in relation to the topic, and their willingness to share this with each other
- ⇒ Conduct an email survey to determine level of agency support.

### ***Operational Principles of the CoP***

- ⇒ Once membership has been established the group must jointly identify goals, terms of reference and operating principles
- ⇒ If available present survey results at the first meeting for discussion and agreement
- ⇒ Publish agreed goals, terms of reference, and operating principles where everyone can access

them and review them periodically in consultation with members

- ⇒ Operating principles can also help members clarify their expectations of each other.

The rules can be practical and aspirational, for example:

1. at least one new learning from each meeting;
2. privacy and confidentiality is maintained within the community;
3. views expressed are those of individual practitioner members; and
4. after each meeting a summary of the discussion is circulated to members.

## **EVOLVING PHASE**

### ***Cross-Agency Facilitation***

Forming a voluntary cross-agency facilitation group can be a useful means of encouraging cross-agency ownership, sharing costs and the facilitation of the community of practice and getting assistance with planning and implementing a forward programme.

In the initial phase the following points may need to be considered:

- ⇒ Regular meetings of the facilitation group may be held to plan the forward program and identify how facilitation can be shared
- ⇒ A facilitation group can help identify expertise, resources and references, presenters, site visits, venues and topics for the broader community, as well as facilitate meetings
- ⇒ Consider establishing an email discussion list or online forum to help communication flow and facilitate relationships across the facilitation group.

### ***Engagement and Facilitation***

A CoP will require initial support and facilitation and in the short term which is usually taken on by the person(s) convening the group. Over time it is expected that this role will be taken on by, or shared with, another agency/project. However, ideally the CoP should be largely self-supporting. The tips listed below may help to encourage a CoP to become self-supporting.

- ⇒ In addition to the cross agency facilitation group all members can be encouraged to take an active

facilitation role at meetings and other activities, and to share information and expertise and capture knowledge.

- ⇒ Meetings and information sharing can draw from wherever the expertise lies, including within the group, from non-members and/or the private sector, and share this information as appropriate.

### **Online Operational Support**

During the establishment and maturity phase the lead agency can facilitate a CoP by providing online operational support through the following activities.

- ⇒ An email discussion group may be set up to encourage member's engagement and share expertise and information.
- ⇒ A web page/Ning/online forum may be a useful tool, and can include public and private domains to encourage information and expertise sharing. For example an index of members identifying their areas of knowledge and experience could be included.

## **MATURING PHASE**

### **Maintenance**

When a CoP has matured it ideally becomes largely self-supporting and the lead agency's facilitation role diminishes. Lead agency staff might consider undertaking the following activities to help ensure that the CoP is continuing to function well and work towards its goals.

- ⇒ Maintaining a watching brief regarding participation of members in email discussion and the web page
- ⇒ Updating the web page and email discussion list
- ⇒ Sharing costs with member agencies
- ⇒ Stimulating meeting attendance and email discussion
- ⇒ Monitoring participation by the facilitation group
- ⇒ Attending meetings
- ⇒ Feeding the CoP useful reference material and information
- ⇒ Sharing information on visiting experts and other relevant events

### **Evaluation and measurement**

Seeking regular feedback from members and periodically evaluating outcomes can be a useful means of measuring

the 'health' and relevance of the CoP. Emerging issues can also be identified through these processes.

The following points could be included in the evaluation:

- ⇒ the level of participation in email discussion, presentations and meetings
- ⇒ the range of agencies involved
- ⇒ the attendance at meetings
- ⇒ the involvement of agencies in a facilitation group
- ⇒ outputs achieved, such as better practice checklists and toolkits
- ⇒ evaluation of the uptake and usage of these checklists and toolkits
- ⇒ member satisfaction.

## **CLOSING PHASE**

### **Closing a CoP**

A CoP may be closed in any of the following circumstances:

- ⇒ the group is no longer active
- ⇒ it has achieved its principal purpose
- ⇒ it has been assessed by the lead agency as no longer serving its original purpose, is no longer considered to be an organisational priority, or has drifted from its agreed mission, and/or
- ⇒ it has failed to become self-supporting.

Suitable processes for closing a CoP may need to be taken into account. Issues to consider include:

- ⇒ Consulting members regarding closing the CoP
- ⇒ Recognising the group's achievements
- ⇒ Acknowledging member's contributions
- ⇒ Notifying members that the CoP is closed, via email and at meetings as appropriate.

At the end of the lifecycle, the lead agency can explore the possibility of working with the facilitation group and community members to make reasonable efforts to catalogue the knowledge gained, lessons learned and practical tools, which are likely to be of future benefit to all practitioners across the field or geographical area.