



August 2007

## **NATIONAL PRACTITIONERS' NETWORK (N.P.N.):**

### **GUIDELINES FOR HOSTING A MEETING**

#### **WHY GUIDELINES?**

These guidelines have been put together by Respect to assist agencies who are considering, or are, hosting a meeting of 'the Network'. It has been mooted several times that Respect should have a more defined relationship with the Network. However, discussions on this have tended to the conclusion that there are advantages to them remaining separate and different, albeit with many shared participants and members and having, to a degree, a symbiotic relationship. The question has most often been asked when there has been a risk that a Network meeting would not take place as there was no volunteer host and then it has been suggested that there should be a role for Respect to somehow step in and avert a 'no Network' scenario.

This has, thus far, been avoided and Respect pulling these guidelines together and, perhaps, in future being available to provide a limited amount of 'technical support' to hosts is a contribution to, hopefully, ensuring that Network continues.

The guidelines are an attempt to draw together the experiences of both previous hosts and participants so as to avoid 're-inventing the wheel' and thus, hopefully, make it less daunting for agencies to volunteer to host/organise meetings.

They are intended as guidance and are not an attempt to impose a strict format on each Network. As those who've attended will testify, one of the pleasures of Network is that each one has its own style and quirks. Having said that, over the years a loose format has emerged and it is this general format, with some points to ponder if variations are being considered, that is outlined here.

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## **WHAT IS NETWORK?**

Since 1992, Network has been a meeting of workers who are involved in working with domestic violence/abuse, either in interventions for perpetrators, in support services for women and children or in related areas of work.

The twice-yearly and, now, two day Network retains an informal style which provides opportunities for practitioners to participate in workshops, share practice issues, update on developments, give and receive essential support and generally recharge batteries. This is achieved through workshops (usually run by practitioners for practitioners) and networking (which usually includes having some social fun together). It is not strictly a conference (i.e. it tends not to have 'headline' speakers) or training event (though many consider it one of the best learning opportunities in this area of work), and its success depends on the active participation of those attending.

As an informal network, it has no formal membership and by attending Network you effectively become a 'member', i.e. you should end up on a contact list. Any member can volunteer their agency to host a meeting. This leads to meetings being held at a range of venues across (thus far) the UK and Republic of Ireland.

## **DECISION TO HOST**

Ideally, agencies should decide to host Network and inform the Network (usually at a meeting) 6-24 months before the intended date. Again ideally, this enables the Network to know where and when the next 2-3 meetings will be, avoids last minute panics that there may not be a meeting as nobody has volunteered to act as host and enables host agencies sufficient time to plan.

In order to host, you should:

- Have gained the backing of your organization, including committing the, mostly human, resources required to organize the meeting, both before, during and after the event.

One estimate of the work involved suggested 170 hours over approx one year. The largest part of these being - not the planning meetings and 'big' tasks - but the routine 'drip drip' administration of bookings.

- Be confident that you'll be able to identify a suitable and available venue (see next section).

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- Have worked out some rough costings (see below) and be fairly confident that you'll cover these and that your agency – or a financial guarantor – are prepared to take (what should be) a small financial risk.
- Have attended (at least) the immediately preceding Network to both see at first hand what's involved and to have picked up any metaphorical 'batons' such as continuity of issues/workshops or other suggestions for the following Network.

## VENUE

There are a number of factors to take into account when selecting a venue:

- **Size:** minimum (often doubles up for dining and entertainment) main room big enough for plenary (100-150 participants) and/or dining (100-150 for lunch; 80-120 for dinner).
- **Size:** minimum 6 workshop spaces of varying sizes (10-40).
- **Size:** 80-100 participants will likely be residential; ideally, most of these will be in venue or ensure that there is other accessible and affordable accommodation nearby.
- **Access:** Accessible by public transport (rail/air and then not too far by bus/taxi) and road. Ideally, you'd want most participants to be able to get there within half a day.
- **Service:** ensure (push managers on this) that venue can feed and water numbers in time scales (you do not want lunches longer than 60-75 mins or breaks longer than 30 mins – but, conversely, don't shorten these as venues will need this time to feed/water and participants will want it to network).

Similarly, ensure ideally all rooms will be regularly serviced and refreshed (cold drinks) and check that chef understands special diets and can cater for them (especially vegetarians).

- **Resources:** enough or access to (be alert to cost – some venues charge exorbitant rates – so borrowing may be a better option) flip charts, power-point laptops & projectors, OHPs, video/DVD players & monitors, microphones (increasingly the size of Networks means that these are desirable) etc. Note that some workshop leaders may bring their own laptops.
- **Attitude to socializing:** OK re disco, live music, karaoke or whatever (see later section on entertainment)?

While not everyone will want to, some/many participants will enjoy socializing into the night with accompanying alcohol. Best to be avoided are venues that will insist on bars shutting early (at least

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midnight?), not enabling or welcoming 'carry-outs', not allowing people to stay in function areas and being concerned about any late sing-songs.

In general, you want a venue that's happy to 'fit' with your requirements, rather than vice-versa.

- **Booking:** will they block-book or provisionally book rooms, preferably without incurring any penalties if all rooms are not taken until close to event (a flurry of late bookings is common)? Will they wait for payment (it may take 6 months or longer to collect all fees).

## COSTS

Networks have generally tried to keep the costs down so as to maximize attendance, particularly from the independent sector. However, the increasing size of meetings, together with the facilities required, have tended to lead to the use of more expensive venues, such as hotels. Despite this, at the time of writing (2007), it has still been rare for the top price (2 nights single residential occupancy, statutory sector) to be over £300.

While this will change, be aware that it's a competitive market. Venues will reduce, sometimes quite considerably, their first or listed price. This may be particularly so if you indicate that you're interested in and like the venue, but not their current price and/or that you have an option elsewhere which better fits your budget. You're potentially bringing venues a sizeable number of customers for two days so be confident in negotiating prices.

Ensure you include all costs:

- If a day delegate rate, what does it include/exclude?
- Equipment hire.
- Entertainment.
- Welcome packs, badges, publicity, expenses, photocopying, postage, phones etc.
- Any 'freebies', e.g. organizers and/or host staff?
- Is host expecting to recuperate some/all of staff time or paying for additional labour?

The number of participants varies, but is tending to be towards the bottom end of a 100-150 range. Factors in this are:

- Location: attractive locations encourage attendance.
- Publicity:

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- The more in advance the better (some diaries work many months in advance and some agencies procedures for allocating expenditure take several months), e.g. flyers at preceding Network will get the dates in diaries.
- The wider, the better: use national e-networks (NPN attendance lists, Respect, Women's Aid etc) and local/regional ones (each Network attracts local participants who've not previously attended).
- Send reminders.

- Competition; any similar events on already?

One suggestion is to estimate the number of participants that you expect and then work out your costs based on 80% turning up. This reduces the chances – if you've done your calculations correctly! – of incurring a loss.

Another is to work out a 'unit cost', i.e. all expenditure, except residence, divided by participants (or 80% of them, if using above), then add/subtract varying factors e.g. type/length of accommodation, sector.

The following estimates, based on recent Networks, may help:

- 80% of participants are residential.
- 65% of participants are residential for both nights and, of those who stay one night, almost all will stay on the second night.
- Most (50-80%) residential participants will want/prefer their own rooms.
- Approx 33% of participants will be from statutory sector.
- Very few day delegates elect to attend the second evening Network meal/entertainment.
- Almost all participants attend both days (in fact there is usually no option to book for only one day).

## **ADMINISTRATION**

As the above costings might indicate, setting up an effective method of keeping track of what's happening, especially bookings, is a key task. Someone to set this up – and perhaps also administer it on a day-to-day basis - will be invaluable.

Whichever you choose as your main system – electronic or paper – you'll need to accommodate (i.e. keep track of) bookings/invoices/joining instructions etc in both formats.

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You'll need systems which record:

- Bookings: what for (accommodation details), contact details, sector, special needs, dietary requirements etc.
- Payment, invoice required/sent, reminders.
- Workshops offered/requested.
- A booking form to include all above.
- You may need to set up a system with venue to keep them informed of running total of rooms and room types needed.
- Banking details?

## **ENTERTAINMENT**

While the entertainment is usually mostly on the second evening, it's a good idea (particularly for newcomers and singleton participants to be able to identify other participants) to set up a meeting time and place (usually a bar!) on the first evening. This may be linked to food, as usually there's a buffet arranged (mid-evening, to allow some/most of those travelling to access it).

Besides a Network dinner, various entertainments, at the venue or elsewhere, have been set up on the second evening: discos, bands, magician, karaoke, fancy dress, bingo, games etc and, usually, combinations of these.

While participants want to have fun, they are unlikely to enjoy inappropriate humor or comment being imposed on them and, accordingly, entertainers should be sensitively selected or warned. Perhaps, political sensitivity, rather than political correctness, could be a guiding principle. DJs can certainly be alerted to the age range and likely musical preferences of some/most participants. (This is not intended to stereotype the wide range of people who attend Network. Rather it is to minimize entertainment which goes down like a proverbial lead balloon with significant numbers of participants).

## **WORKSHOPS**

The range, quality and relevance of workshops have always been the strength of Network. Some may be lecture style, others quite structured workshop spaces and others might be no more than participants with a shared interest gathering in a room with only a nominal facilitator who starts and ends the time slot. Some may carry on themes from previous meetings,

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while others will be pre-offered by participants or spontaneously arranged during meetings.

The organization of workshops on the first morning has always been a distinguishing feature of Networks with the workshop 'market place' being variously perceived as well organized, baffling, tedious, or entertaining. Its 'organized chaos' invariably (so far) appears to work in the end.

What seems to have emerged as the best way to manage the 'market place' is a mixture of pre-decided and 'on-the-day' decided workshops. If booking forms allow participants to both offer workshops (and state requirements) and express workshop topics that they might be interested in attending, then organizers can guesstimate which workshops are likely to run and allocate some of these to appropriate timeslots and rooms/facilities. Each timeslot may then leave 2/3 workshop spaces vacant to be decided 'on-the-day'.

To assist participants' choices, the 'market place' should include those offering or expressing interest in workshops giving a (very brief) outline of content. The person fronting the organizing of workshops will need to be responsive and flexible and, simultaneously, decisive and assertive in assessing interest, deciding which will run and allocating times/rooms.

She/he will also need several 'go-fors' to quickly operationalise decisions, i.e. record decisions, create signing up sheets and get these displayed in appropriate places. Sheets should include workshop title, name(s) of facilitator(s), room, timeslots and, if required, any restrictions on numbers. The latter can be aided by listing numbers, e.g. 1-2-3 ...10, so it's clear when restricted number is reached. Some facilitators may want to add, once/if restricted number is reached, a further space for expressions of interest, so they can decide whether or not to offer to repeat the workshop.

### **SIGNING IN & WELCOME 'PACKS'**

You will need a system for booking quite a lot of people in within a short time frame. Having this system open for some (6-8pm?) of first evening will reduce pressure on first morning. You'll probably need at least two people to book in and distribute packs/badges, with another two available to handle queries, give directions and (often) shepherd arrivals away from a crowded reception area towards the refreshments.

Welcome 'packs' should include:

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- A list and contact details of participants.
- A timetable of events.
- A workshop programme: timeslots, rooms, pre-decided and vacant workshops.

And might include:

- Information on host agency.
- Local tourist information.
- Paper, pens, any freebies etc.
- Flyers on other organizations, events, publications etc.

## **STAFFING**

As already indicated, you will need at least one person with good administrative skills to set up the meeting. During the actual meeting you'll need at least one person to front the plenary sessions and the workshop 'market place', with several helpers to staff reception, organize workshops and generally be available for the various tasks that crop up.

The busiest time will likely be the first morning approx 8.30 - 11.00 when 4-6 staff will be needed. It's helpful if participants can identify host staff, perhaps by differently coloured name badges.

Also ensure that you've identified and cultivated a good working relationship with the key people from the venue's staff. These will vary from venue to venue but may include duty managers, conference organizers, chef, night porter, head waiter, receptionist, bar staff. Indeed, good relations with any and all venue staff may well prove useful when you want a problem solving quickly or some 'rule bending'.

## **ON THE DAY**

**Planning:** It may sound obvious but the key to a smooth Network is to run through every small step of every stage of the day. Plan who'll do what and when, anticipate any problems and plan how to respond to them. Avoid having a couple of people trying to do everything. Ensure staff/helpers know what you want them to do and trust them to get on and do it and always have someone spare to do the unexpected.

**Timing:** In general, plan the time in some detail and try to keep roughly to it. Know what flexibility you have (e.g. start time of first workshop) and don't have (e.g. catering arrangements). Be responsive but also assertive and be

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alert in the plenary to long winded diverting issues, which may need respectfully closing down or diverting elsewhere.

**Speakers:** Besides the organizers/hosts there may be others (usually, at least, the director of Respect) who'll want to make announcements.

If you decide to have a local 'big-wig' to welcome/start the Network, ensure they both keep it brief and are briefed that the audience will be knowledgeable about domestic abuse and will likely be (politely) bored by platitudes or an overdose of local information/developments.

While Networks don't usually have main speakers, if you decide (perhaps the availability of a national/international figure with something timely to say) to have one, consider timetabling this into a second day plenary or a large workshop slot, rather than adding to the first morning plenary (when there's usually enough to do).

**Workshops:** Ensure their locations are signposted and rooms have appropriate equipment (not least sufficient chairs).

**Display space:** Ensure there is sufficient (your booking form may have asked whether participants wanted any).

**Day 2:** Consider having a second plenary, however short, for (minimum) announcements, feedback and farewells.

Whatever is timetabled, the reality seems to have become that, after lunch, there are few people left. Travel time (often before a weekend) is the main reason for this. So, the general advice is not to plan anything of any consequence in the afternoon, even if this means a late lunch.

## **POST NETWORK**

Whether praise or negative criticism, do consider giving the venue some constructive feedback.

Be prepared for it taking 6 months or longer to obtain all fees.

Be prepared to liaise with and support next hosts.

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Hopefully, pat yourselves on the back and know that all that work and apprehension was well worth it to have hosted another successful Network – WELL DONE! - Dave Potts, June 2007.

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