



the**policy**network

Tender Brief

Promoting networking among local government policy officers

for the Policy Network

July 2009

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Policy Network is a charity which aims to promote the sharing of knowledge and good practice amongst policy professionals in local government and more widely in the public sector. It aims to do this by organising events where policy officers can network and by providing specific targeted training, these are complemented by an e-bulletin and a website. It is run by its members: practitioners in local government.

2. Background and Context

- 2.1 The Network had experienced falling membership for a number of years. In 2007, following consideration at the AGM, the Board decided to make membership free and to focus the network's activities on its two core, and successful products, the annual conference and the Stepping Up course for people new to policy. The Network now wishes to revitalise itself as a network based on personal contacts between members. The attached paper explores this in more depth.

- 2.2 The distinctive characteristics of the network are:

- it is totally owned by local government – it does not depend on any central body
- it is neutral politically, in terms of type of council etc.
- it covers the whole of the UK (and potentially beyond)
- it includes policy officers from not just the corporate centre but also service areas (by signing up to the website and therefore the e-bulletin) and
- it has an established history (and therefore potential goodwill from past members)

3. Requirements of the Brief

- 3.1 The Policy Network Board is looking for creative person(s) to support us in taking forward the Policy Network's aspirations.
- 3.2 We require somebody who can build on the thinking set out in the attached paper ("Development of the Policy Network"), in particular the challenges set out in Section 4 of that paper ("*How do we get from here to there?*"):
- Extend the Policy network's reach to potential members through the use of a variety of means including new social media ("Web 2.0") and face-to-face contact
 - Encourage members to take an active involvement in the Network between events
 - Facilitate networking between policy officers under the umbrella of the Policy Network
 - Set out how the consultant's proposals will be implemented

- Progress the implementation process by setting up a range of communication channels for members and potential members

4. Tenders

- 4.1 Consultants are asked to submit their proposals in no more than 6 pages (minimum font size 11 point), setting out:
- Their methodology and work programme
 - A summary of relevant experience
 - Clear products or outcomes of their proposals including any suggestions for staged payments in relation to those outcomes
 - Contact details of two referees for whom you have undertaken relevant related work in the last two years
- 4.2 Any questions about the tender contents or process should be emailed to Adrian.Barker@idea.gov.uk
- 4.3 Proposals should be submitted by email to enquiries@thepolicynetwork.org.uk
- 4.4 The deadline for submission is 12 noon on Friday 21st August 2009. Late tenders will not be accepted.
- 4.5 The successful bidder will be notified in early September.

5. Budget

- 5.1 A guideline budget of £7,000 (excl. VAT) has been set aside for this exercise. However, if there is tangible success from the consultant's work (e.g. from clear indications of increased networking activity and/or increased participation in Policy Network events), it is possible that the Board will wish to retain the appointed consultant for further development of the exercise.
- 5.2 The Policy Network will consider suggestions for staged payments of the agreed price as indicated in paragraph 4.1 above.

Appendix

Development of the Policy Network March 2009

This note sets out proposals for developing the Policy Network beyond its current skeleton form, following a meeting of the Policy Network sub-group on 19 February 2009 made up of Kevin Ambrose, Liz Hume and Adrian Barker.

1. The Need for Further Development of the Network

The Network has been struggling with falling membership for a number of years. In 2007, following consideration of a paper, 'Vision for the Policy Network', discussion at the AGM and a paper, 'Whither the Policy Network?' the Board decided to make membership free and to focus the network's activities on its two core, and successful products, the annual conference and the Stepping Up course for people new to policy.

Whilst Stepping Up has continued to be very successful, we have struggled to get respectable numbers for the annual conference. It was decided to give further consideration to the nature of the network (1) because the function of organising two events is not sufficient attraction to maintain involvement of board members, (2) it was thought that a revitalised network might help attract greater numbers for the annual conference, and (3) it was felt there was still a potential viable, more comprehensive model of a network which would be of value to policy officers

The analysis set out in 'Vision for the Policy Network' still stands:

"The Policy Network has a long and illustrious history, however the world has changed since it was set up in the early 1990s. Then, its networking, directory of members' activities and newsletter, all targeted specifically at policy officers were unique. Now there is information on numerous websites, support and networking from the IDeA and newer networks, greater regional activity and the development of on-line communities of practice. Rather than implying that there is no longer a need for the Policy Network, all of this, on the contrary, confirms the continued need for networking opportunities. And the need will continue to grow. As the world becomes faster moving with more complex problems to address – from crime and health to climate change and technological advances - there will be an increasing need to learn from each other directly, in 'real time'. The people with the expertise are the people doing the jobs on the ground, and we have to find ever better ways to collect, distil and share that expertise.

"This means PN needs to be quite clear of its distinctive offer, if it is to be of value – and it only exists to be of value to its members. Distinctive characteristics of the network are:

- it is totally owned by local government – it does not depend on any central body
- it is neutral politically, in terms of type of council etc.

- it covers the whole of the UK (and potentially beyond)
- it includes policy officers from not just the corporate centre but also service areas (by signing up to the website and therefore the e-bulletin) and
- it has an established history (and therefore potential goodwill from past members)”

2. A Vision for the Network

So what would a successful Policy Network look like from the point of view of its members? A satisfied member might say:

- I have more opportunities to **meet up** with colleagues locally and nationally. Network events have an input from the national level, and from other areas, so I am keeping right up to date. Many of these are free (hosted by different members in turn) and I get a discount on paid for events.
- I am a member of several **thematic groups** within the network so I can exchange thoughts or get together with others on specific issues such as implementing councillor call for action, performance management in partnerships, social media, behaviour change, wellbeing / happiness. There are occasional ‘roundtables’ on key developing areas of policy which I attend.
- We **share briefings** and approaches to common issues so we are not all having to do everything from scratch. This also includes a store of **shared resources** such as links to key sources of information, templates for briefings, and an up to date list of recent policy announcements.
- **It’s easy to network with people.** There are a lot of people I see from time to time, and Policy Network events are particularly good for introducing people to each other. There’s also a simple but up to date list of who is working on what and contact details, so it’s easy to track people down and make contact with them (Policy Network people tend to be good at responding). We make good use of facilities like communities of practice and twitter for instant chat and feedback.
- There is a select number of **training and development** opportunities available which you can’t find elsewhere, including for people new to policy, master classes, action learning sets and mentoring arrangements.
- It feels like a network of people that helps each other, but there is always a sense of a strong core, and I am kept up to date with the various things going on through a regular **email bulletin**.

3. Is that a viable model?

Is that a viable model (i.e. if we could get there, would it be self-sustaining?). Or is some variant of it viable?

The sub-group felt that this would be a network that people would want to be part of (but that will only finally be tested by whether they participate in practice). What is particularly different from what we have now is the idea of

people getting to know each other. At the moment, people meet at the annual conference, but you wouldn't remember people from one conference to the next: ongoing contact might change that. It should be particularly attractive to people who work 'on their own'. That includes people isolated within their organisation – the single policy officer in a district, the person who supports the LSP but is not part of a larger policy unit. It is particularly helpful for them to have others they can bounce ideas off and who can give them the assurance that they're not missing something important.

However that is only part of the answer as to whether it is a viable model. There are also the questions of how it would be resourced (the business model) and whether it would have sufficient distinctive value given the alternatives that already exist.

Does it offer anything different that you can't get elsewhere?

There are lots of other networks (some of them are listed in the appendix). There are also many places people can talk to each other on-line (e.g. the IDeA Policy and Performance community of practice, which has over 2,200 members and the ESD-toolkit). Why should the Policy Network try to compete against these alternatives which are already satisfactorily meeting the need?

- **We were here first!** We don't need to be guilty about being in this space. We don't want to compete with others for the sake of it, but if we think we've got something distinctive we should go for it.
- Some of the other networks are struggling too, so it's not that they are necessarily satisfactorily meeting all the need. We should think of working **co-operatively** with them as well as competing. We can drive traffic to each other and share learning more widely. We might want to invite other networks to present at our conference.
- We can work with and through those other networks bringing benefit to all. We might be seen as rather ambitious and presumptuous to describe ourselves as a '**network of networks**' but effectively that's what we could try to do. We would help joining up across those networks by, say, making people aware of useful publications and events from PMPA or IAG, driving traffic to the IDeA Policy and Performance community of practice, sharing the nuggets from discussions at regional events.
- We have a different **status** from many other networks. We are owned by practitioners. We don't have to go through the same bureaucracy as some other organisations. We cover more than England. We can include other sectors.
- We should focus on what makes us distinctive. That should include a network where **people know each other**. It could also include a network encompassing **partner bodies** (police, fire, health etc.).
- It should help save policy officers' time, simplifying, condensing, signposting not adding to the number of email alerts and websites they have to keep up to date with.

The Business Model - Resourcing

We are looking for a network where most of the value is generated by members helping each other. That has always been the case for the Policy Network. However that isn't enough to keep the network going. There is the need for formal administration, particularly since we are a limited company, which is currently done by Professional Briefings. Support is needed to run events, but that can be contracted and the costs offset against the income (again, currently PB). There is a need for strategic management: considering the longer term future of the network, deciding what activities to move in and out of, ensuring the business model still works and generally keeping an eye on things – activities currently performed by the Board. However there is a further role of facilitating the network, making sure the self-help works and giving it a little shove every now and then. This includes encouraging participation, spotting opportunities for network activity (e.g. a new theme group or event for an upcoming policy issue), writing the newsletter etc. This requires a good knowledge of local government and the policy officer role (and is different from the role currently played by PB).

There are a number of options for how this facilitating role might be provided:

- rely on Board members. Despite willingness to help, most don't have the time that this would require.
- get help from others in the network. This might be a longer term solution, but it will be difficult to recruit people to these tasks until a viable network is in place. Also there probably won't be large numbers: typically 1% of people initiate on-line discussions, 10% contribute and the rest just look.
- employ someone to undertake the role, probably on a short-term contract or consultancy basis

It is only the last of these that would be likely to offer enough input to kickstart the Network back into life, as a network.

If we were to employ someone, this would need to be funded. Options include:

- advertising and sponsorship: we have discussed these in the past and have rejected them as it would threaten our neutrality.
- reintroduce a subscription: this could prove difficult with no proven offer available.
- have a 'premium' membership for extra services. Possible, but what services and would it create a two tier and divisive membership?
- donation of money or someone's time from a local authority, national body etc. Unlikely in the current financial climate
- rely on reserves and income from events: risky but potentially possible.

Although risky, the last of these seems the most viable option. We would have to manage the risk by limiting the contract to funds currently available (e.g. 20 days spread over six months). We should also combine it with as much support as possible from the Board, and recruiting support from the membership. The key objective would be to create a viable network which members feel part of, and where they know each other. This should help

increase numbers at the conference, and the facilitator would also help with the marketing effort. This would then help fund ongoing support (if necessary).

4. How do we get from here to there?

If there is a need for the network and a business model that will kickstart it and ensure its sustainability, what else is needed to get from here to there? There are a number of issues to be tackled: how to get a sense of 'membership', how to get people to know each other, and how to enable the network to operate in on-line spaces.

What does it mean to be a member?

At the moment, membership means that you are on a mailing list, and we would suspect that most people wouldn't know they are 'members' of the Policy Network. At the moment there is nothing to 'join', so there will be a timing issue of when we offer more and when we try and get people into real membership.

Are there ways we could make membership more real? In time, the offer would be all the things discussed above – events, training etc., but are there immediate offers from us and commitments from them which would create an informal contract or bond? We want to get people to agree to sign up to something, and know they have joined a network. Some options are:

Offers from us:

- Offer a discount on the conference and Stepping Up, say £50, so not a massive amount but enough to make it worthwhile (especially when you're getting something for nothing). We would probably have to increase the current cost to make it viable for us.
- Offer to support an event they host in their authority through helping develop a programme and activities, suggest speakers and market it.
- Have 'markers' of membership, such as a number, a card, etc.
- Agree to keep them up to date, e.g. through an email bulletin.

Commitments from them:

- a commitment to participate in the network, to seek and offer help, etc. (This is not something we could or would want to police, but would be a moral commitment)
- provide profile information and agree to keep it up to date (make clear this is to enable networking, not so someone can sell them something). This should include a picture, and ideally a short video of them talking about themselves
- provide, and keep up to date, information about what they are currently working on
- agreement to help out more substantially, such as by hosting an event, host a visit by other members, supply a document, provide mentoring support. Perhaps we could record such contributions, with a view to

celebrating them to the network (and implicitly shaming others into providing something).

Helping members get to know each other

We have struggled in the past to run events, both paid for and free, so should not underestimate the difficulties of getting it right. However, we have run successful events, so although it won't just happen on its own, we know it can be done. Some suggestions are:

- Start with contacts people have made at the conference and Stepping Up – try and put people back in touch with each other, such as through events. These aren't the only target audience but they could form a substantial core quite quickly.
- Organise events in regions, but not where there are existing groups. Organise on themes rather than specifically geographically. Get members to host them. Try to get a distinctive feel to them: not a standard series of presentations at one extreme or people just sitting around talking to each other at the other. Include some presentations, problem solving workshops, site visits etc. The format shouldn't rely on large numbers attending, so events can still run with 6 – 26 people.
- Help put people in touch with each other to for mentoring, buddying, coaching, action learning sets etc. (Skilled support required to do these properly so it may be a longer term ambition, but there may be opportunities to put people in touch with each other more informally in the meantime).
- Offer a Peer Supported Problem Solving Process (PSPSP) (a sort of mix of action learning set and action learning – AB has a proposal available).

How the network can operate on-line

We spent a good deal of time and money some years ago establishing a website which could do all the things it is now suggested the Network offer – putting people in touch with each other, listing who is working on what, sharing documents, having discussions. That it didn't take off as hoped may have been as much due to the energy and resource required to make it happen, as to the fact that it was in many ways ahead of its time, providing the sort of facilities now common on community of practice platforms.

The options for on-line networking are now much wider and there are 'white label' sites that let you set up an immediate on-line presence, simply and for free (e.g. www.ning.com, www.grou.ps). We might want to explore these further rather than spending money on setting up a bespoke site. We could also easily set up a Facebook page.

However, policy people are already communicating with each other, or could potentially do so, in many places on-line, such as the IDeA policy and performance community of practice, ESD-toolkit site, twitter, facebook, myspace blogs and second life. Is there a way in which the Policy Network

could inhabit and use these spaces while retaining its own identity? The sub-group didn't have a final answer, but wondered if there might be a way forward using tags. A standard tag (something like #PN, or something more unique) can be applied to twitter entries, blogs, facebook comments, pictures etc. This identifies to users that this person is part of the Policy Network (so maybe more worthwhile contacting), and could allow the network to retransmit useful information from a range of networks. Tagging also allows everything with that tag to be drawn together. For example, this was done for two IDeA events, and the results can be seen at www.ideaperformance.com. This website aggregates blogs, videos, pictures and twitter entries with the relevant tag, so bringing a range of discussions and contributions together in one place.

Innovative use of social media might also be educative for many policy officers and could help them as it becomes increasingly used in authorities.

This idea would need more work, and some specialist help, but could represent a workable way forward.

Building the Network

There a number of different approaches for pursuing the ideas outlined above. We could focus on one element at a time (events, online, the membership offer) or try and pursue them all together. We could go for a big bang approach, and write to all on the mailing list at once. Or we could build up slowly, approaching individuals we think would be keen and active, running events for them, sharing things on-line, and generally 'modelling the approach' until we have a critical mass and a working network which we publicise more widely.

5. Conclusion

We see a way forward for the Network which could rebuild its role as a dynamic, supportive and valued way in which policy people can get together. The essential ingredients would be:

- The conference and Stepping Up remain as flagship (and money generating) offerings
- We ask people to sign up to a specific membership agreement which carries clear offers and commitments
- The key feature of the network is people knowing each other (initially face to face, followed up by phone and on-line). We do that through personal contact and lots of small, authority hosted events. We build on existing contacts from the conference and Stepping Up.
- We make maximum use of new social media, using tagging to straddle a range of existing channels.
- We work co-operatively with existing networks
- As this approach takes off, we open the Network to partner bodies.

We reach this state by employing a facilitator for an initially temporary period to make things happen, strongly supported by the Board and bringing in other Network members to help as much and as soon as possible. This work will help drive numbers to the annual conference to support further, ongoing work.

Appendix – Other Networks

Existing sub-regional –

SPIN (Southern Performance Information Network)

PPRN (the former branch of Policy Network / Policy and Performance Review Network in Hampshire)

Yorkshire and Humber

IDeA Policy and Performance Community of Practice

PMPA (Public Management and Policy Association)

Inter-Authorities Group

Solace – increasingly has heads of policy as members

CECSNet - County Chief Executive's Corporate Support Network

Daventry benchmarking group.

LARIA (Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association)

BURISA (British Urban and Regional Information Systems Association)

LARCI (Local Authority Research Councils Initiative)

Tourism and ec development network.

Core cities

LIS – prospective network being set up on Local Information Systems

British Quality Foundation