2. How To Organise Networking Activities

2.1 How to organise local or regional networking events

Hosting a networking event has many benefits, including greater visibility and promotion for your enterprise, making new connections and building relationships with key contacts.

There are a great variety of types of networking event, explained in more detail in **Chapter 2.2 Types of Networking Activity.** Different event types are used to accommodate and suit various settings and contexts, but the first thing to consider is *defining the purpose or focus* of your event.

1) Defining the Focus of Your Event

When planning to host a networking event, it's wise to clearly define the purpose or focus of your event. Effective events usually focus on a particular area of activity or on a thematic issue, such as rural-specific challenges, or on the role played by rural actors, such as community-owned businesses.

It can also be an opportunity to introduce key stakeholders, such a local government representative or a guest speaker or short training session as a means of attracting people and making the most of the time as in many rural areas travel time will be a factor, so making best use of the time of getting people together can assist people to decide it is worth coming.

The purpose of your event can help you determine the target audience (who you want to attend) and the tone of your event (whether it is casual or formal). This will assist you to sell the event to people when you advertise or send out invites. For instance "An opportunity for rural-based social enterprises to meet, share ideas and identify opportunities to work collectively."

2) Venue and Location

There are different options to consider, depending on budget, availability, time of day and the type of event you are running.

It is important to pick a venue in a location which is easy for attendees to find and access, either near public transport or with good parking facilities.

This will minimise any frustrations that attendees might feel before they arrive, and encourage people to attend. This is always challenging within the rural context due to geography, but can be addressed by having a roving host venue with digital access.
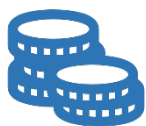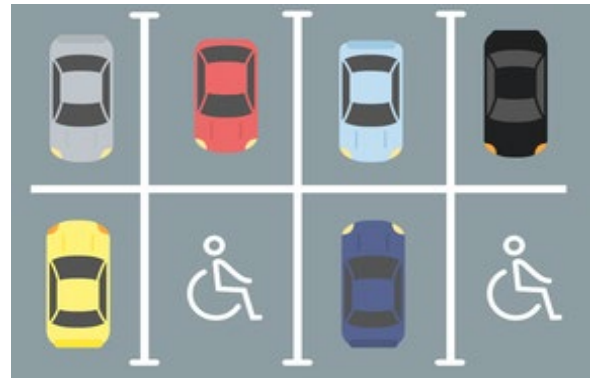
If you have a suitable and sizeable space, you could hold the event in your own premises. Alternatively, if your premises are too small you could consider a community hall or a room in a reasonably priced pub/bar/hotel.

It can be worth reaching out to another social enterprise or public sector organisation, who may be happy to rent a space to you for a good price, or provide the space in kind as a contribution if they can see that your event is in line with their objectives and/or aims to support local social enterprise sector.

Another option, is to hire a venue run by a member of your network. This keeps money within the sector and allows you to build valuable relationships with your peers. It can be useful to get to know each other's organisations and enterprises, and to see how things are done similarly or differently in other enterprises by having a presentation or tour of the premises.

3) Time and Event Structure

To decide the best time of day to host your event, you must consider your audience. While it can be difficult to suit everyone, it's worth bearing in mind the working patterns and childcare commitments of your target audience to create a timescale which suits the majority of people.

When thinking about the event structure, keep in mind that your priority is to get people to network. It is useful to start the event with a quick go around to allow people a short introduction on their organisation (2 mins). This then allows people to identify people who they can follow up with during the event.

Consider things like not having too many chairs in the room to encourage people to stand, approach others and mingle. Providing refreshments can also encourage attendees to stay longer and mingle with each other over food and drink. This can help reduce some of the awkwardness people fell when introducing themselves to new people.

4) Target Audience and Number of Attendees

Your target audience should be quite clear to define, and will usually focus on a geography with a shared interest in social enterprise or theme such as arts and culture, or environment, etc. The goal of a networking event is to put like-minded people together, so focus on being specific about the type of people at the event, rather than the quantity.

"Quality, not quantity" is the phrase to remember. Your attendees will have a more enjoyable time if there's only 10 people who attend, but they have great conversations, rather than meeting 100 people who they can't connect with.

Events with numbers of people between 30-50 make it is easier for people to remember names and give introductions. Events with more than 50 attendees can be counter-productive, as people become overwhelmed by the number of people and lose depth in their conversations.
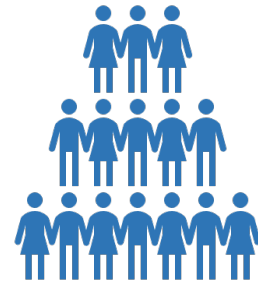
5) Personal Invitations

Personalised invitations make the person you're inviting feel valued, and more likely to attend. Focus on how their attendance would benefit them, not you. Start personal invites early (at least 2 weeks before the event) and keep a list of RSVPs, organised into yes's, no's and maybe's. This can be done on an event sheet, which you can keep visible as a reminder for follow up prompts.

Microsoft Excel can be useful for this with an overview of names, organisations and contact details as well as initial info sent, response received and follow up prompts. This can then be transferred across to an attendee list. See our example below:

Name	Organisation	Phone	E Mail	Initial invite sent (Date)	Follow up prompt (Date)	Able to attend	Apologies

When considering invites, it can be useful to use the following lists:

- **Hit List:** These are influencers and people you would like to attend, but have not been able to get confirmed yet.
- **To Invite:** People who you are considering inviting or are awaiting the opportunity to invite.
- **Yes:** People who have confirmed attendance.
- **No:** Include why they cannot attend.
- **Maybe:** These are people who said maybe. Don't let non-committal people slip through your grasp and follow up with them until they give you a yes or no.
- **Don't Bother/Invite:** People who you don't want to attend, or have given up inviting.

There are also digital tools which can assist with event planning. An example of this would be 'Trello' which is an app that gives you a visual overview of what is being worked on and who is working on it.

For more information on how to use Trello, see our 'How-To-Use Slack and Trello' guide, which can be found here: https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26558_download&client_id=hfwu

6) *Promoting Your Event*

Promoting your event is a very important part of the organisational process, as you aim to attract a large quantity of your attendees through visibility and promotion. Often in a rural setting this can be achieved via direct contact, however there are a range of digital tools that can also assist. You could also consider local radio or local newspaper as a means of raising the profile of your event.

Eventbrite is a useful tool which allows you to set up an event page and integrate this with Facebook to promote your event on social media.

Other forms of digital media can be used to target your intended audience, such as LinkedIn or Facebook Community Groups. If you are hosting a local event, consider placing an advert in the local paper, or posting flyers around the community to increase participation of those excluded by digital media. Invite anyone specific you'd like to attend with a personalised invitation.



7) Greeting and Hosting

When hosting your event, you should go out of your way to make it easy for your attendees to network and connect. It's important to provide a straightforward check-in process and introduce yourself to attendees as they arrive to make them feel welcome.

An introduction session can be a really good way of breaking the ice and allowing everyone 2 mins to introduce themselves and their organisation. You need to be quite strict with time though, as some people can talk!! And so it is important to explain from the outset that it is strictly 2 minutes each for introductions and appoint a timekeeper.

It is also important as the host to take time to chat and listen so you can introduce people with similar interests, business needs and goals.

To help facilitate connections, it's a good idea to ask people to provide some details when they register to attend your event (Eventbrite has a Custom Questions feature, enabling you to request any extra information you'd like at the point of registration).

This includes details such as name of organisation and their interests. You can put together a small information pack, with a list of all attendees and
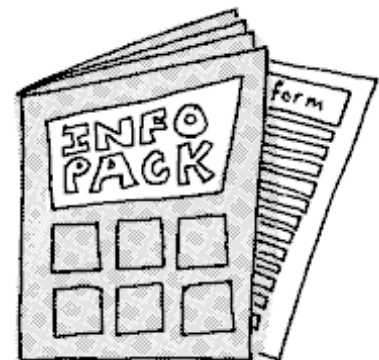
information about them, to send to attendees prior to the event. This allows attendees to know who else is attending, and decide who they'd most like to speak to and connect with. When people arrive at the event, you should provide name tags so attendees can identify those people straight away.

8) *Follow-Up After The Event*

It is good practice to follow-up the day after a networking event. This is where you should reflect on the purpose and what was achieved at the event as well as potentially reinforcing a specific call-to-action. This can be done by sending an email which thanks people for coming and emphasises the success of the event in fulfilling its stated purpose.

See these guides below for more information:

https://millennialeb.com/the-complete-guide-to-planning-and-hosting-a-networking-event/

https://www.fsb.org.uk/resources/how-to-host-a-networking-event

https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/blog/how-to-organise-networking-event-ds00/

2.2   Types of networking event

Networking events can resemble a huge array of different events, which can be more casual or more formal depending on the occasion and purpose. Casual networking events can include purposeful meal meetings or speed networking events, which allow people to interact in a more relaxed atmosphere and create personal relationships as well as professional connections.

More formal networking events generally have a more structured itinerary, and encourage professional networking between attendees. Larger events such as conferences can have a very broad focus, attracting large numbers of people from multiple sectors and organisations, and tend to occur on a less frequent basis.

The table below gives an overview summary and the benefits of attending different types of networking events.

Type of Networking Event	Overview	Benefits of Attending
Purposeful Meal Meetings	An effective and enjoyable way to create informal networking opportunities over food. Can be used in a	Sharing food leads to shared conversations, ideas and puts attendees at ease. Meal meetings generally take

	variety of contexts, from business meetings to community gatherings and creates a more relaxed atmosphere where working relationships can be built and enhanced.	place in open, informal settings that encourage people to be comfortable and open in their behaviour and conversations.
Community Events	These are local events and can be organised by any establishment or organisation: Local trade, charities, faith-based groups or nearby colleges and community groups. They can include summer fairs and fundraising events which often involve local businesses, providing good networking opportunities.	Connecting with a range of business/influential people in your local area. Raising your profile locally, getting behind the goals of your local community. Making your social enterprise more visible to local people, which can lead to customer and client opportunities closer to home.
Speed Networking Events	The business version of speed dating, these events provide a quick way for people to network. For more information, see Activity 1 below.	Gaining exposure to a lot of networkers in a short space of time. Meeting people in a fun, high-energy atmosphere can help networkers to relax and develop relationships more easily.
Formal Networking Events	These are generally organised by a social enterprise network or organisation, and seek to connect businesses and individuals together to discuss a certain topic, promote business opportunities and encourage professional networking.	Conversations focus on developing professional relationships and building your network. Business opportunities such as partnerships, collaborations or referrals may arise out of these.
Conferences	Conferences are generally themed around a specific topic or sector, and will follow a structure of	Connecting with a wide range of people (conferences often attract large numbers of people as they focus on

	seminars, keynote speakers and workshops. Networking intervals will be planned during the event or afterwards.	topics that affect multiple sectors). Meeting with key stakeholders, and being able to follow up with connections right away (there are ample opportunities to meet again later in the day/event).
Learning Exchanges	Learning exchanges offer people the opportunity to visit and see first-hand the experiences of others, to learn through the exchange of ideas and the sharing of solutions with groups who share common interests and challenges. Groups can offer new perspectives and approaches to each other and share experiences and good practice.	For both visiting and host organisations to be able to see their own projects through fresh eyes, and come away revitalised having shared ideas, solutions and discussed approaches to common challenges. Deepening and growing networks of peer support and strengthening practices of knowledge and idea sharing.

2.3   Types of networking activity

There are a variety of different networking activities that can be used to engage groups of people. What type of activity you use depends on the purpose and type of networking event and the context of the group who are meeting.

If the sole purpose of the networking event is to allow people to mingle and make connections, then there may not be any need for a set activity, as people will naturally seek out and engage with the people who they have come to talk to.

However, this is not always the case, and some people may be less confident than others to walk up to a stranger and introduce themselves. This is why an 'icebreaker' activity can be useful to break down people's initial inhibitions and get people animated and engaged (see Activity 1: Speed Networking).

Other networking events such as conferences or exhibitions may have a formal structure of planned workshops, speakers and seminars, which will focus on a particular theme or topic.

You may have to consider:

- Do the attendees already know each other?
- Is there a specific topic you are meeting to discuss?
- Should this meeting be more formal or informal?

If your attendees do not already know each other, then the first activity on your agenda should be to introduce everyone. Speed connecting (like speed dating) can be a good way to do this.

Activity 1	Speed Networking
What?	Speed networking is a model which evolved from speed dating, with the objective of meeting a lot of people in a short amount of time. Speed networking is a structured process which facilitates introductions and conversations between people who don't know each other.
How?	The basic structure of speed networking is the rotation of participants, so that each person gets the opportunity to interact with every other person attending the event. The period of time allotted to each person to introduce themselves and listen to their partner can vary from 30 seconds to 5 minutes depending on the size of the group.
To Remember...	It may be useful to remind your participants before the event to prepare a short 'elevator speech' about themselves, which summarizes the key elements of their work, their educational history, and their thoughts on their future career path/work, as well as maybe some information about their hobbies and interests. Ask the participants to get to know each other, exchange contact information if they think future communication will occur and find a takeaway they'll remember about the other person.

2.4   Case Studies

An example of more informal, community-focused networking activity could take the shape of community meals, organised walks, or educational classes such as IT lessons. Village associations in Finland play a strong role in organising and delivering village gatherings, with a case study given below.

Case Study	Village Walk
Location	Finland
What?	The Rural Women's Advisory Organisation is a nationwide organisation in Finland, who promote an extensive women's network in rural areas. They

	have established village walks as a way to bring together residents to network and explore opportunities for local development.
How?	Walks are led by a landscaping expert, and usually take two to three hours. The route is planned, and the development targets for discussion are selected as stopping places. Attending residents will be able to consider together what are they most valuable features of their village, and what features should be improved. Follow-up measures and landscape management decisions are made as a group. Using an external expert to lead the walk also avoids near-sightedness and potential conflicts of interest.
Conclusion	Village walks provide valuable local insight on how to develop the village environment, helps to identify needs and priorities, and provides a platform for networking and socialising. Future proposals can be discussed, and identified action can be shared with and supported by the municipality and officials, who provide information and support.

➢ **Case Study: Finland Website Ohoy!**

https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26556_download&client_id=hfwu

- The Rural Women's Advisory Organisation is a nationwide organisation in Finland which aims to extend and support women's networks in rural areas. The project 'Website Ohoy!' was created in order to train more than 2000 elderly people in rural areas to use social media and develop their IT literacy skills.
- The effect of living in rural and remote areas means that many elderly residents have to travel long distances (often with poor transport links) to access vital services and participate in community activities. As more services are increasingly being transferred to the internet, the elderly population is increasingly at risk of exclusion.
- This project used volunteers to teach elderly participants, who can now communicate and network online, and access online services such as banking and booking medical appointments. Participants can now participate in social network communities and have gained new networks, as well as being able to keep in touch with family and friends in geographically dispersed locations.

➢ **Case Study: Romanian Demonstrative Farm and Training Centre**

https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26557_download&client_id=hfwu

- Project to set up an agricultural training and consultancy centre in rural Romania. This rural farm development involved a range of different stakeholders (international organisation, Romanian rural development association, rural high school students and rural residents) who worked together in a successful partnership.

- National networking was facilitated through a 'summer school' learning exchange which invited farmers from various regions of Romania to share experiences, create a national peer support network and take educational classes at the training centre.

- Networking abilities were also developed through integrating famers' activities with international volunteers with the aim to teach English to the farmers involved in the programme. Knowing an internationally spoken language help connect the farmers with peers from other countries and develop better networks for collaboration.