

# Growing Networks: A Case Study

by Octopus Community Network

## Why, and how, to use a case study

This case study explores the development of a network of community centers (Octopus Community Network) in the London Borough of Islington.

It has been produced to support continuing professional development through peer-to-peer learning between people involved in forming or developing a network. In particular, it is suited to those exploring the benefits and risks concerned with pursuing growth and diversity.

Case studies make great **peer learning tools** and are often used in business and management schools. They can be used to describe a situation, raise issues or problems (for analysis and solution), and are good for framing alternative actions gained from a range of perspectives.

“The key thing that makes case studies so effective in management education is their

ability to engage people ... as the saying goes, tell me and I'll forget, teach me and I'll remember, involve me and I'll learn. Learning through case studies is very rewarding because you are part of a learning experience which is really enriching.” *Martin Kupp, ESMT (ecch 2012)*

“Case studies bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the academic and the workplace.” (Barkley et al 2005:182)

This case study provides two stories that set out the experience of Octopus Community Network in growing and diversifying its network.

Each is followed by some questions.

You can use these stories, and the questions that follow them, as tools for individual reflection or group discussion with other members of your network.

# A brief history of the development of community centres

Settlements were some of the earliest examples of community centres.<sup>1</sup> The concept was that university men and women would live in residential settlements in the poorer areas of the great cities. These residential settlements should be a “club house” amongst the poor for residents to meet and share with their neighbours. Key social influencers identified three aims of these Settlements:

- scientific research concerning poverty,
- the furthering of wider lives through education, and
- an enhancement of leadership in local communities.

Educational Settlements started the adult education movement. Adding to this mix were the social service clubs that grew out of the miner's strikes (1926-7). Community associations came into play in response to the new housing estates formed after the First World War. In an early paper, the NCSS set out the following definition for the community centre and community association:

*“A **Community Centre** may be defined as a building which (1) serves a community organised in an association which is responsible for managing a building; and (2) provides facilities for the development of the recreational, cultural and personal welfare of that community; and (3) constitutes a meeting place for voluntary organisations or other groups in the community which need accommodation.*

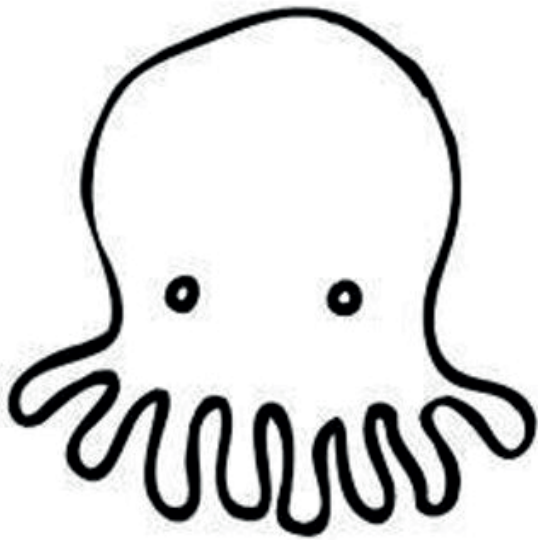
*A **Community Association** may be defined as a voluntary association of neighbours democratically organised within a geographical area which constitutes a natural community, who have come together either as members of existing organisations or as individuals, or in both capacities, to provide for themselves and their community the services which the neighbourhoods require.”<sup>2</sup>*

After the Second World War, the community centre was an essential amenity, according to the government. The number of community centres grew to over 900 by 1960 – and also significantly shifted in their function. They became less of a social service and took on more of an educational aspect, and they were focused around the operation and maintenance of their centre with reliance on assistance from their local council. Community centres today look very different to their beginnings as Settlements in the poorest areas of major cities. However, they remain a place where people can organise. “Over 4.4 million people are estimated to use community buildings every week.” *Marriott, P. (1997). The role of community buildings in strengthening local communities, York: York Publishing Services.*

<sup>1</sup> [locality.org.uk/blog/history-community-centre/](http://locality.org.uk/blog/history-community-centre/)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Mess and King 1947:73) Locality CCWeekUK

# About Octopus Community Network



The founding members of the Octopus Community Network first came together in 1999 as a result of the London Borough of Islington announcing year-on-year cuts to the annual grant programme for the voluntary and community sector (VCS), including the 10 largest multi-purpose community centres.

Islington Council funded the development of a network of multi-purpose community centres to (i) buy in a “fire fighter” fundraiser to stabilize the individual organisations and (ii) employ a fundraiser to work with individual community centres in order to build their longer term capacity and systems for seeking and securing a range of funds. Additional business planning support was also provided to ensure that the community centre leadership was capable of running and developing a community centre that was capable of generating income as well as securing grant funding.

Over a period of two years, the model proved to be hugely successful with all the community centres in the network stabilized and a new partnership approach to delivering

services, including employability support that emphasised career opportunities and jobs in the community centre sector and community enterprise; health and well-being services and activities. Capacity building support was also developed to ensure that the community centres could begin to exchange effective practice, share lessons learned, and explore opportunities for working towards quality assurance kite marks that best reflected their needs.

By the end of the two-year period of initial funding, the Octopus Community Network had formed a Company Limited by Guarantee, become a Registered Charity and had begun to pilot the VISIBLE quality standard.

As a result of their new partnership approach to delivering services, the Network had secured funding via the European Social Fund for back to work support, had funding from the City Fringe Partnership to develop and support community enterprises, had secured funding from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) for a cross-centre volunteering programme (the first programme to join up wide ranging volunteering services in Islington) and, had secured a £1M, seven year grant to run the Healthy Living Centre initiative in Islington (funded by NOF and BIG Lottery); the latter programme helped secure another £1.4M in match funding and delivered 23 health and wellbeing projects.

Fast forward to 2018 and membership of the Network has slowly grown; the network continues to meet bi-monthly and is now composed of 13 of Islington’s largest community centres – each one of these a designated Community Hub and funded as a Strategic Neighbourhood Partner by Islington Council. All but one of the founding members is still represented.

Octopus is currently funded by Islington Council as a strategic borough-wide partner to support the work of the community centres, collaborate strategically to help implement local plans, and to link with other networks in the borough.

In the recent past, one of the common criticisms of the Network has been that it is a clique – a small close-knit group of organisations that do not readily allow others to join them. This assumption is now being pro-actively challenged through the following:

- Liaising with Islington Council Homes and Communities team to understand the typology of other community centres in the borough.
- Reviewing and changing the Articles of Association to accommodate a larger membership.
- Updating the Membership Application Pack.
- Meeting with Management Committees/ Boards of potential partners to promote the Network and the benefits of membership.
- Individual Network members reaching out to and engaging with Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs) responsible for managing the smaller estate-based community centres.
- Targeted mailings to key council Homes and Communities Community Development Officers to explore how best to broker relationships with TRAs.

The two case study stories below are drawn from this experience and explore in more detail:

1. The dilemma of growing and diversifying the network.
2. Shifting power within an established network.

# Case Study Story 1: The dilemma of growing and diversifying the network

Octopus Community Network (Octopus) has grown from the bottom up. We have faced the challenge of feeling our way into maturity, expanding and contracting according to energy levels of individual members, until the day the main grant funder, Islington Council, specifically requested that all of the Community Hubs funded by the council should be able to join the network.

This change shifted the dynamic and to some extent, the purpose of the network. As a result there are some underlying concerns about how this change, if not managed correctly and with full ownership and commitment of the current membership, might dilute the value, dynamic and purpose of the network. Whilst some consider that growth and diversity offers challenge, it also offers multiple opportunities for outreach into the community, new collaborations and opportunities for local residents.

To facilitate growth, the Octopus board and membership discussed, agreed and have updated the Articles of Association, in order to provide a framework to facilitate the growth in membership and enable the admission of new types of members.

Islington Council's Homes and Communities team has recently undertaken a mapping of smaller community centres in the borough: these centres are mostly estate-based and run by Tenants and Residents Associations. One of the ideas proposed is that these smaller community centres are encouraged to become Octopus members. However, current network members have had either no contact with the estate-based centres, or have faced challenges in establishing links with the TRAs.

Octopus's Network Coordinator has asked that key officers within the Homes and Communities team broker relationships through events and informal meetings, without success. It has also been established recently that a new much smaller collaboration of three community centres have joined forces to form a network. Meanwhile, with a new Membership Application Pack produced, the Octopus Network Coordinator has reached out to and engaged one key new member and they are now engaging with the network.

# Clarify understanding

Either on your own or in a group clarify your understanding of the case study problem and the solution that is described. Note down a short summary in response to these key questions.

## Questions

1. What is your understanding of the purpose or need for diversification or growth? Is there a clear reason why growth is being pursued? If so, what might that be? What factors have contributed to the decision for growth and diversity?
2. So far, what has the Octopus management team (Board and Network Coordinator) done to prepare for network diversity and growth? Is there anything else that should be done?
3. Critically consider the approach taken by the network so far. Is this passive or assertive? Which further challenges might Octopus (as a network of community centres) be confronted with? Which alternative forms of action might be available to facilitate growth and diversity?

# Case Study Story 2: Shifting power within an established network

For more than 15 years, the person responsible for coordinating Octopus Community Network has taken full responsibility for organising network meetings. At the outset, these meetings were dynamic, energised and member-centred. In recent years, mainly due to the nature of network funding, the meetings have become more administrative and functional. As a result, the Network Coordinator became responsible for the following:

- Setting up a calendar of network meetings.
- Setting themes and agendas for network meetings.
- Organising the rotation of meetings (at different member sites).
- Organising who will Chair the meeting.
- Identifying guest speakers to attend meetings and organising their attendance (to open up collaborative and joint-working opportunities).
- Servicing the network meetings in terms of taking and writing up of minutes and actions and circulating these; and, following up on actions.
- Presenting opportunities (mainly funding/ income generation) to the network and taking responsibility for driving forward collaborative funding proposals and projects.

The network often refers to the Network Coordinator as “the glue” – the influential person that holds the diverse community centres together and the person with the grit and determination to ensure that the network not only survives, but also thrives.

Since participating in the Unlocking Networks programme, the Network Coordinator

now considers the new title of “network weaver” to be more appropriate. They bring disparate groups together and provide the spark for collaboration, creating a web of connections until a network is formed. The weaver or connector might be thought of as a Collaborative Project Coordinator a Network Facilitator or a Network Guardian. Such a change would require a power shift within the network, using collaborative leadership to develop a supportive network of peers.

Ahead of one network meeting in the early autumn of 2017, the Network Coordinator wrote to the network proposing, that the format and content of the network meetings should be reviewed. A short proposal setting out ideas was attached and members were encouraged to read, digest and think about the proposals being made ahead of that meeting.

At the meeting, members were asked to take part in World Café discussions on key themes, address questions written up on flipcharts (a Discussion Wall), and as a final task were asked to produce a template for the new meetings.

Now, the network meetings are run in the following way.

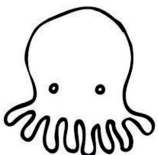
- I. The role of meeting host is rotated between members.
- II. Hosts of the meeting ask the membership for agenda items.
- III. Hosts present on a theme that offers an issue, challenge or opportunity to be discussed.
- IV. Hosts write up and circulate the minutes and actions of the meeting.

# Clarify Understanding

Either on your own or in a group clarify your understanding of the case study problem and the solution that is described. Note down a short summary in response to these key questions.

## Questions

1. How did the Network Coordinator shift the focus of the meetings and how has power been shifted?
2. What were the key challenges that the Network Coordinator faced in formatting and organising these meetings? What could have been done differently much earlier on?
3. Critically discuss the quality of the solution that the Network Coordinator came up with. Which further challenges might the network and/or the Network Coordinator be challenged with? Are there alternative actions that need to take place in order to sustain the meetings in such a way?



For more information about Octopus Community Network visit: [www.octopuscommunities.org.uk/](http://www.octopuscommunities.org.uk/)