

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE GUIDE

FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY
AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE
ORGANISATIONS

Sophia Fedorowicz
Rachele Hine
Carol Healey

“It first enables us to get a real understanding of an issue; it’s depth; how and who it impacts and hammers home why things need to change. It captures different services’ awareness through to breaking an issue down to understand the barriers and causes”

CoP member

Table of Contents

Authors Introduction	01
What is a Community of Practice?	02
Why start a Community of Practice?	03
Starting a Community of Practice	04
Case Study: Stoke-on-Trent Family Support Community of Practice	05
Quick Guides:	06
• Community of Practice	
• Co-production	
• Solution Focused Approach	



01

Authors introduction

This guide aims to provide an updated resource to support 'doing' communities of practice as developed in Stoke-on-Trent by Steve Freeman, Carl Plant, Bruno Ornelas, Sara Wilshaw, Lee Dale, Andrew Meakin, Sharon Sharman, members of the Stoke-on-Trent Community of Practice, VOICES, Expert Citizens and partner agencies. As this is the second edition of the Community of Practice Guide, building on a strong foundation of work, it seems right to recreate the introduction from the first guide here, rather than devise my own. So here it is.

This guide has been produced alongside the development of the Stoke-on-Trent Family Support Community of Practice (CoP) and is written from the perspective of the first facilitator. My role here is to capture and reflect the work done by everyone involved. The core team in the production of this guide and the Family Support CoP, and without whom this would not have been possible, are Natalie Ornelas, Duane Poole, Chris Lawley, Lee Dale, Andrew Meakin, Darren Murinas, Rachele Hine, Carol Healey, the members of the Family Support CoP, Family Focus, Expert Citizens and partner agencies. No team... No output.

This guide is aimed at a broad and inclusive readership; anyone interested in an inclusive and competence-based community model, anyone wishing to establish a community, potential members seeking to better understand communities, those wishing to commission and develop communities. We believe this guide has a parallel benefit in giving an example of ways in which people with lived experience are (and should be) involved in all stages of systems change as part of an inclusive team.

We dedicate this guide to Steve Freeman.

“My time as facilitator has been a confirmation of all the things I hoped for when beginning my work as a volunteer in a night shelter in Stoke-on-Trent in the mid 1970s. Environmental conditions were below today’s expected standards and yet they had a positive impact. The team had a humane, positive approach which could be worthy of an Insight Award in present day. During my time as chair I have seen optimism borne of experience and reframed pessimism. I’ve been lucky to witness ideas develop into lifechanging practice which is now recorded and embedded. Silos have been deconstructed by their inhabitants and best practice not only shared but adopted.

The Stoke-on-Trent model has been shared, shaped and adopted internationally.

What more could anyone want in a lifetime let alone a career?”

Steve Freeman,
Solution Focused Practitioner,
Facilitator of the SoTCoP hosted by Voices of
Independence, Change and Empowerment in Stoke-
on-Trent (VOICES).

“There almost seems to be hesitation and anxiety when it comes to the crunch; they all know that it must be done but often want it on their own terms, dictating the landscape and the rules of engagement. Using language and terminology that is thought to be beyond our realm of intelligence, thus discounting us from any conversations relevant to services and institutions we have been a part of.

Luckily for me, this was never the case with the SoT model; in fact, from its inception, it was of utmost importance that we recognised the true value of the voice of lived experience and encapsulated it in a way that could be beneficial for all in the city.”

CoP member

02

What is a Community of Practice?

Domain, Community and Practice

The concept of a Community of Practice (CoP) was introduced by cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s. Wenger (1998) defines CoPs by three key elements:

Domain

A shared area of interest

Community

A group engaged in collective learning

Practice

Knowledge, tools, and techniques developed through shared experiences

Where resources are limited and challenges are complex, CoPs provide a collaborative, cross-organisational space for knowledge sharing and co-creating solutions. Unlike formal training or hierarchical structures, they are informal and driven by a commitment to shared learning.



03

Why start a Community of Practice?



Building networks

Sharing positive practice in a CoP supports network building by creating opportunities for collaboration beyond the immediate community. This exchange strengthens relationships across organisations, sectors, and regions, leading to greater resource sharing, cross-disciplinary innovation, and strategic partnerships (Probst & Borzillo, 2008).

In the VCSE sector, CoPs help develop social capital, the networks, trust, and norms that enable collaboration. Given the sector's reliance on partnerships, the connections formed in a CoP can lead to joint projects, funding applications, and advocacy efforts (Putnam, 2000).

Networking can also be important for employee wellbeing as it can promote peer support, collaboration, resilience, motivation, and professional growth.



Sharing positive practice

Sharing positive practice and outputs from a CoP enables collective learning, enhances professional standards, and drives innovation. In the VCSE sector, where practitioners often work in isolation, CoPs provide a structured yet informal space for knowledge exchange, connecting professionals across organisations. This enables the sharing of expertise, success stories, and challenges, ultimately building both explicit knowledge (e.g., frameworks, positive practices) and tacit knowledge (e.g., insights from experience) (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Sharing outputs also builds capacity, as members refine and adopt best practices, enhancing collective expertise. This is crucial in the VCSE sector, where improving operational capabilities is a priority. By supporting cross-organisational learning, CoPs promote innovation and practical problem-solving (Amin & Roberts, 2008).

As CoPs evolve, sharing insights and effective practices becomes increasingly important to maximise their impact. By standardising positive practices, CoPs help promote consistency and improve practice across disciplines and sectors. For instance, a healthcare CoP focused on patient safety might share protocols that reduce medication errors, thus raising care standards across institutions (Li et al., 2009). CoPs bridge the gap between theory and practice by producing outputs like research, toolkits, guidelines, and case studies that are grounded in real-world experience. These resources make abstract concepts more actionable and assist practitioners in navigating complex challenges (Wenger et al., 2002).



Facilitating Knowledge Sustainability

CoPs support the sustainability of VCSE organisations by supporting a culture of continuous learning, helping them stay relevant and responsive to change in an evolving landscape (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). They ensure knowledge retention by documenting and sharing outputs such as reports, toolkits, and case studies, preserving institutional memory for future practitioners (Wenger et al., 2002).

Ultimately, sharing positive practices enhances collective learning, standardisation, professional networks, and knowledge sustainability. This process benefits both CoP members and the wider sector, potentially creating a lasting impact beyond the community itself.

Prioritising knowledge sustainability in the sector helps to retain the wisdom accumulated through years of practice and lived experiences; supporting continuity, and growth, ensuring lasting impact, resilience, and quality services.

04

Starting a Community of Practice



Collaboration between organisations

Partnerships enhance resource sharing and innovation, particularly in financially constrained environments (Davies, 2011). By pooling resources and expertise, organisations across sectors (i.e. VCSE; public and business) can address complex social issues such as homelessness and mental health more effectively (Alcock, 2010). The VCSE sector's ability to facilitate grassroots innovation complements public service structures, fostering more adaptive and efficient solutions. VCSE sector organisations can have deep community connections which helps to support engagement with marginalised groups often excluded from formal services (Cairns et al., 2005). This collaboration supports co-designed services that reflect lived experiences, leading to more responsive interventions.



Challenges

While CoPs offer significant benefits, sustaining them can be difficult due to financial constraints and voluntary participation, which may lead to inconsistent engagement. Ensuring inclusivity is another challenge, as power imbalances between large, well-funded organisations and smaller grassroots groups can hinder equitable participation. Effective CoPs must create inclusive spaces where all voices contribute meaningfully.

Partnership working

Partnerships are crucial for effective public services, community well-being, and addressing complex social issues. By combining strengths, resources, and expertise, they achieve outcomes no organisation or sector could attain alone. Collaboration helps break down siloed service delivery, addressing broader social determinants (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). For instance, a joint housing initiative can integrate employment, education, and mental health support. These partnerships also foster community empowerment and social capital. By working with the VCSE sector, local authorities can demonstrate trust in community-based solutions, promoting civic engagement and resilience (Fung, 2006).

Involving people in Communities of Practice

Lived experience in this context refers to the firsthand knowledge gained through direct experience of a social issue. Involving people with this lived experience in CoPs enhances understanding by complementing theoretical knowledge with real-world insights.

Including people promotes authentic learning, grounding discussions in practical realities. For example, in healthcare and social work, firsthand accounts help practitioners understand how policies function in practice, leading to more empathetic and effective approaches (Wenger, 1998). It also promotes inclusivity by valuing experiential knowledge alongside academic and practice expertise, and making a start on addressing traditional power imbalances in decision-making (Tew, 2004).

Including people in CoPs strengthens shared learning, revealing blind spots and encouraging more responsive strategies (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It also builds trust and legitimacy, when those directly affected contribute to shaping solutions, communities are more likely to trust the outcomes. Integrating lived experience within CoPs deepens knowledge, promotes equity in knowledge sharing, and ensures policies and practices align with real-world needs.



The role of a facilitator

Facilitators play an important role in by managing dynamics, maintaining focus, and encouraging collaborative learning and decision-making. Active listening and flexibility enable the group to harness collective wisdom and achieve productive outcomes.

Rather than leading or instructing, facilitators create the conditions for participants to find their own solutions through collective problem-solving and reflection; creating an environment of trust and inclusivity, where all voices are valued (Schwarz, 2002).

Posing questions, summarising key points, and keeping conversations aligned with objectives helps to keep the CoP functional. This can require tactful steering and the ability to distil complex ideas into clear conclusions (Kaner, 2014). Facilitators gauge group energy, knowing when to encourage deeper reflection or move discussions forward, and when the group needs a break. They must be comfortable with ambiguity and change, prepared to adjust approaches based on the group's needs. Aligned with the CoPs 'community' aspect, the role of facilitator can be shared and rotated.



Establishing a core group

A core group is essential for a CoP's sustainability and effectiveness, consisting of individuals committed to the community's objectives and taking on leadership roles. They guide the CoP's direction, facilitate, engage members, and reflect the community's diversity (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The core group stewards the CoP's goals, encourages collaboration, and manages logistics like events and communication. Their role sets a foundation for commitment, shared leadership, and continuity while remaining flexible to encourage broader participation and evolving contributions over time. The group may create a 'Terms of Reference' to guide these activities.



Creating conditions for openness

Creating the conditions for openness within a CoP is essential for trust, collaboration, and innovation. It ensures that diverse perspectives are welcomed, leading to inclusive problem-solving and stronger relationships. When conditions for openness are cultivated, all voices, especially marginalised ones, are heard, enhancing collective knowledge, belonging, and growth. Engaging in activities together within the CoP strengthens this openness by building mutual understanding, and a sense of connection. These shared experiences help to break down barriers, promote open communication, and support group cohesion. By ensuring everyone's voice is considered, these discussions lead to more innovative, equitable, and widely embraced solutions, resulting in fairer outcomes.

Sustaining the community

Sustaining a CoP involves paying continual attention to its evolving needs, engagement levels, and shared goals. Maintaining momentum requires active facilitation, clear communication, and an ongoing connection to the members' interests and real-world challenges. A CoP thrives when its members feel that their participation adds value, not only to themselves but also to the community. Communities flourish when there is mutual respect and recognition of contributions, promoting a sense of ownership and belonging (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002).



To sustain engagement, members should be encouraged to participate regularly in discussions, share resources, and engage in collaborative problem-solving, thus contributing their expertise to create a dynamic space for knowledge exchange. Effective leadership is central to sustaining a CoP. Regular check-ins, surveys, and feedback mechanisms are options to consider to support adapting the CoP to the evolving needs of its members.

Drawing out themes

Identifying themes helps focus collective learning and collaboration, enabling CoP members to explore specific areas of interest. Facilitators play a key role in this process by encouraging open dialogue, asking questions, and supporting the collating of the contributions of CoP members. Once themes are identified, they provide a foundation for ongoing discussions and activities, ensuring that the community's efforts remain aligned with its goals. Over time, themes evolve as the group gains new insights, which is why facilitators must regularly revisit and refine them to maintain relevance and impact (Wenger, 1998).



Recording Conversations

Developing effective outcomes relies on clear documentation and using diverse methods of capturing insights. Post-its notes, for instance, are a simple, interactive, and inclusive way to engage participants. Each note provides a space for concise thoughts, enabling individuals to quickly share ideas, opinions, or experiences. By categorising or clustering notes, patterns or themes emerge, making feedback easier to analyse. The tactile nature of this method also allows for anonymous contributions or structured prompts, adding flexibility to the process.

Surveys are another tool for gathering feedback, providing a structured way to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Well-designed surveys with clear questions can highlight trends, assess satisfaction, and identify areas for improvement.

Group members volunteering to be 'Note-Takers' helps to ensure accurate documentation of feedback and discussions. A dedicated person capturing key insights and action points allows group members to focus on engaging fully with the conversation. It's important for note takers to be attentive and organised. After the session, notes can be shared with all participants to ensure the feedback is accessible and actionable. There are multiple ways to share and analyse the gathered insights.

Written feedback

Emails, reports, or summaries provide clear, documented responses that can be referred to later.

Verbal feedback

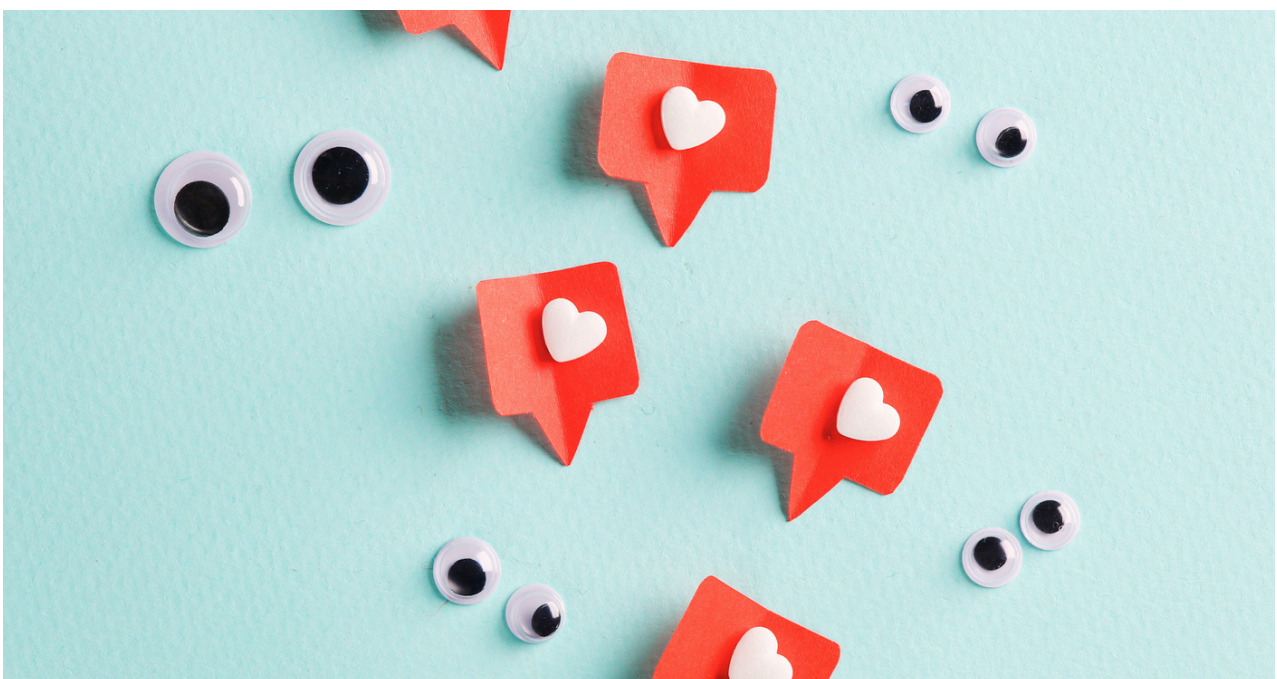
Whether in-person or via video calls, verbal feedback enables immediate clarification and dialogue.

Peer-to-peer feedback

Supports collaboration and learning within teams, can offer a well-rounded perspective by including input from all directions and levels.

Visual feedback

Graphs, charts, illustrations, and videos are some examples of how visual feedback enhances accessibility, and can make data-driven responses more engaging for a wider audience.





05 Case Study

Stoke-on-Trent's Family Support Community of Practice

Established in May 2024, the Family Support CoP meets monthly at the same venue, bringing together representatives from several organisations directly or indirectly involved in supporting families in Stoke-on-Trent.

A central and recurring theme across multiple meetings has been the critical importance of multi-agency collaboration. Given the evolving landscape of family support in Stoke-on-Trent, there is a strong collective commitment to strengthening partnerships, sharing resources, and improving information flow to drive meaningful change.



The CoP has explored several avenues to drive positive change:

- **Influencing Policy:** Reviewed Stoke-on-Trent City Council's revised Threshold Document to align it with frontline realities and support effective decision-making.
- **Enhancing Communication between organisations:** Created a WhatsApp group for real-time coordination and resource-sharing across the family support sector.
- **Shaping Training:** Hosted a training needs survey to identify priorities and inform future staff development which was made available to family support commissioners.
- **Amplifying Lived Experience:** Involved people with lived experiences of accessing family support in the city.

People attended the family support Community of Practice for various reasons:

- **Networking & Idea Sharing:** Connecting with peers, sharing ideas, and ensuring their voices were heard.
- **Learning About Services:** Gaining insight into available family support services to enhance their work.
- **Collaboration & Advocacy:** Understanding sector-wide challenges and engaging in informal dialogue to strengthen advocacy.
- **Problem-Solving:** Addressing systemic barriers to improve service delivery.
- **Interest in Improving Family Support:** Exploring how collaboration among practitioners, managers, commissioners, and those with lived experience can enhance services and outcomes.



“I think the impact of the community of practice... has been pivotal in that joining up collective services and being able to identify collective themes, shared vision, shared agendas and common problems.”

CoP member



06 Quick Guides

Community of Practice Quick Guide



Co-production Quick Guide



Solution Focused Practice Quick Guide



Additional tips

Focus on Strengths, Not Deficits
Focusing on strengths involves actively shifting the conversation from problems and weaknesses to capabilities and achievements.

Celebrate Small Wins
It acknowledges that progress is often incremental and that each step, no matter how small, contributes to larger achievements.
Highlight achievements to reinforce that even small steps are meaningful and valuable in the bigger picture.

References

- Alcock, P. (2010). Building the Big Society: A New Policy Environment for the Third Sector in England. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 1(3), 379–389.
- Amin, A., & Roberts, J. (2008). Knowing in action: Beyond communities of practice. *Research Policy*, 37(2), 353-369.
- Cairns, B., Harris, M., & Young, P. (2005). Building the Capacity of the Voluntary Nonprofit Sector: Challenges of Theory and Practice. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 28(9–10), 869–885.
- Davies, S. (2011). Outsourcing and the Voluntary Sector: A Review of the Evolving Policy Landscape. *Social Policy Review*, 23, 231–250.
- Fung, A. (2006). Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance. *Public Administration Review*, 66(s1), 66–75.
- Kaner, S. (2014). *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Li, L. C., Grimshaw, J. M., Nielsen, C., Judd, M., Coyte, P. C., & Graham, I. D. (2009). Evolution of Wenger's concept of community of practice. *Implementation Science*, 4(1), 11.
- Probst, G., & Borzillo, S. (2008). Why communities of practice succeed and why they fail. *European Management Journal*, 26(5), 335-347.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster.
- Schwarz, R. (2002). *The skilled facilitator: A comprehensive resource for consultants, facilitators, managers, trainers, and coaches*. Jossey-Bass.
- Sullivan, H., & Skelcher, C. (2002). *Working Across Boundaries: Collaboration in Public Services*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tew, J. (2004). *Social perspectives in mental health: Developing social models to understand and work with mental distress*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., & Snyder, W. M. (2000). Communities of practice: The organisational frontier. *Harvard Business Review*, 78(1), 139-145.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business Press.
-

**We thank you for your
continued efforts to
create positive system
change.**

Contact

Expert Citizens CIC
Office 37-38
The Dudson Centre
Hope Street
Hanley
Stoke-on-Trent
ST1 5DD

www.expertcitizens.org.uk
Office: 01782 683006