



Because life is better when we belong



RESOURCES KIT

**Information, tips and tools to support
Community Connectors to build and
maintain their neighbourhood group.**

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Disclaimer: The ideas and suggestions in this kit and on our website are examples only. Individuals are responsible for taking adequate safety precautions, obtaining relevant permissions and observing any relevant laws or regulations related to their activities. Neighbourhood Connect takes no responsibility for the activities of neighbour groups.



About this resource

This Resource Kit has been developed to support Community Connectors in running a neighbourhood group. It includes more information on planning and running a more formalised gathering, connecting with community partners, dealing with challenges and creating a safe and comfortable neighbourhood group.

The information here is presented as a guide only as ultimately, it's up to each Community Connector and participants to build a neighbourhood group that they and other members are comfortable to belong to.

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1. Planning Meetings

1.1. Planning the initial gatherings

You may want to start with something informal, such as a picnic in the park or a morning tea just to informally chat with neighbours, and then invite people to discuss the possibility of forming a neighbourhood group at a second or third gathering after the ice has been broken.

Some Connectors will prefer a relaxed approach where people get to know each other over social get-togethers and have short discussions about ideas for the group. Over time, the type of get-togethers and what the group would like to do in addition to social activities will arise. That's fine. What follows are ideas for Connectors who prefer a more deliberate approach, which is also fine. Experimenting with what builds community is an exciting part of Neighbourhood Connect and Community Connectors are encouraged to share their approach with our national team of Connectors.

As a leader/facilitator it is good to have a plan for how the meeting might run and what tools or resources might assist to make it a success. You may want to indicate how long the meeting will last (and ensure the formal part of the gathering does not run over time). Someone should be assigned to take notes of what is decided.

It can help to check if everyone understands English. If English is not a first language, try to communicate in ways that can be clearly understood. It's also important to know beforehand whether anyone requires help to attend, particularly if they are challenged physically or intellectually.

As the leader/facilitator you should model the behaviour and attitudes you want group members to use; ask open ended questions to encourage discussion; involve all participants; give positive feedback - use encouraging words, tone of voice and body language. Be careful not to impose your views on the group or dominate the discussion or make assumptions about other people's opinions.

The aim is for neighbours to feel relaxed and to interact comfortably with one another. Food and drink and some social time are always good.

1.2 Suggested format for the first discussion

Useful things to bring:

Contact details form (template on the website), nametags (or stickers and markers), butcher's paper/large sheets of paper, markers, notepaper, pens, blu-tack, camera, refreshments, a couple copies of the list of possible activities for neighbour groups.



Welcome:

Welcome people and ask them to use the Contact Form and nametags. Encourage everyone to chat to neighbours they don't know. Perhaps 15 minutes after the gathering time, have everyone take a seat, preferably in a circle (allowing everyone to see everyone).

Community Connector's introduction:

I'm <your name> and I'd like to see if you, my neighbours, would like to get to know one another better and perhaps do some things together to make living here even more pleasant, more feeling like 'I belong here – I'm part of this place'.

There are a lot of neighbourhood groups doing great things and I came across the idea of Neighbourhood Connect neighbour groups. I immediately thought: "I'd like that for my neighbourhood". Neighbourhood Connect groups are about connecting with your near neighbours and doing things together. Neighbourhood Connect supports this with ideas and guidance but what we do is completely up to us.

Today we have the next x hours/minutes to discuss the possibilities, decide if we'd like to form a Neighbourhood Connect group and choose the next steps.

Participants introduce themselves - round robin:

Let's go around the circle, introducing yourself with your name, what you do if you wish to share it, your street, how long you've lived here, how many neighbours you already know and what made you decide to come today. I'll start and then we'll go around (keep yours brief as an example to others).

An optional ice-breaker, possibly before people are seated: What we have in common:

Stand in a circle, move in to the middle if you:

- have lived here (less than a year, 1-3 years, 4-10 years, over 10 years, over 20 years)
- play a musical instrument
- have a (cat, dog, bird, other pet)
- like (walking, running, going to the gym)
- been in a community group before
- have (no kids, 1 child, 2 or more kids, pre-school age kids, primary school age kids, teenage kids, adult kids living with you)
- care for (a person with a disability, parents)
- enjoy (reading, cooking...)

Capturing the moment:

Could we take pictures of our first get together and use these to encourage people to come along or to promote Neighbourhood Connect groups? Just step aside and let me know if you don't want to be in any pictures.



Ground rules:

I probably don't have to say this to this group, but it's worth agreeing on a few ground rules. For our discussion could we agree to: (i) treat everyone with respect; (ii) welcome all opinions; (iii) listen to what others say without interrupting; (iv) encourage quiet people to contribute; and (v) encourage talkative people to let others speak also.

One trick is to use a 'talking stick' so only the person holding the stick can speak if you find people talk over others.

Note: the Bank of Ideas has a useful document that you might share and discuss with the group on the danger of squashing ideas prematurely; [50-Phrases-To-Kill-Ideas-And-Stifle-Creative-Thinking.pdf](#) and perhaps tack up on a wall somewhere the wonderful quote from Mike Mather: "the power of being heard is a wondrous thing".

Are there any other ground rules that would be useful for us?

Topic: Positives about the neighbourhood – first small group discussion:

- Let's break into groups of 4, with people you don't know. If you are here with a partner, please go to different groups. Please have one person take notes so we can share your ideas with the larger group and to give to me afterwards.
- Discuss for 10 minutes what you like about living in this neighbourhood and what its best features are.
- Then draw on a large piece of paper and discuss for 10 minutes, if our neighbourhood was a form of transport, what type would it be? Where are the people? Is it fast or slow? New or old? Why did you pick that form of transport?
- Back in the large circle, a person from each group shares.

Further discussion:

- Did the groups come up with similar or different views of our neighbourhood?

Group activity: Options for Neighbourhood Connect groups:

- Let's stand in a circle in front of the chairs. I'm going to read out ideas that neighbourhood groups elsewhere have done or thought about doing. I'll pause after each one and if the idea sounds appealing you step forward
- Note: this is not a commitment; it'll just give us a feeling for people's interests.
- Read out each idea from the lists of ideas for Neighbourhood Connect groups and notice which ones elicit some interest.

Topic: The value of forming a group here – second small group discussion:

- Now find a different group of 4 people you don't know. Choose a note-taker who uses a large sheet of paper to write the activities that are mentioned (or people can write their own ideas on the paper).
- Discuss for 10 minutes your thoughts about having a neighbourhood group. Do you like the idea? Do you have any concerns about it?
- What would you like to see the group do?



- Back in the large circle, a person from each group reports whether their small group was interested in forming a Neighbourhood Connect Group and puts the list of preferred focus areas on a wall and shares what is on it.

Topic: What might our group do? – full group discussion:

- Sit in the large circle (or semi-circle if you need to be able to see sheets stuck to a wall) and review which were the interesting ideas...
- So, now that we've had a chance to consider some of the possibilities, can we narrow them down to the ones we might start with? These may or may not be the most popular ideas, as some things don't need many people to work (for example, going on a walk with neighbours). The important thing is that for each one we write, one of us, at least, is willing to take part in. Remember we can always change or add new activities as we go but we want here to get things that are realistic for us to start with now.
- As an activity is written down, people put their name next to it if they want to be part of it – encourage someone to agree to help organize it as they add their name to the list.

Topic: Next steps – whole group discussion:

- Call for a small team of people to join you as Community Connectors, leading the group.
- Set a time for the second gathering and decide on its social element (BBQ? Afternoon tea?...)

Now let's mingle and relax over (a BBQ, refreshments, a drink).

1.3 Follow-up

Once you've had your first discussion it's then about putting the ideas people were keenest about into action. Building momentum can take a while, as can getting the word out. So keep plugging away and ask for feedback on how people think things are going.

Specific tasks:

- Circulate notes from the first discussion: type up notes and circulate them back to those who attended (and interested others: the notes can function as a promotion tool so keep them short and action/ decision oriented). Consider a summary being included with the next invitation to neighbours in the precinct.
- Share the notes with the Neighbourhood Connect Manager and discuss how the gathering went.
- Meet up with your Connectors team to debrief and plan future actions, including the next gathering.



Agenda might include:

- The team's own structure and mode of operation: frequency of meetings, assignment of tasks, co-opting members.
- How decisions will be made. Traditional options are: (i) by consensus; (ii) by a show of hands (majority rules); (iii) decision of the leader/s... We like the suggestion from the Transition Network: to use consent rather than consensus:

Consensus means AS A WHOLE, THE GROUP SUPPORTS a proposal, it's very time-consuming and requires huge commitment

to the concept. Because of the time element, it often causes people to "drift away." Consent means that NO ONE IS BLOCKING the proposal with a "paramount and reasoned objection". It's faster, and demonstrates collaborative compromise. "Paramount and reasoned" are excellent criteria but quite difficult in practice.

- Preliminary consideration on whether to work with an existing organisation service or community group in the area [see section 4]
- Letter drop all the households in the precinct telling them what came out of the first discussion and inviting them to the next one – include an agenda, as more people may want to take part once they know what the group will be doing.

1.4 The second discussion

In addition to welcoming new members (and if there are many, perhaps another ice-breaking/introduction activity) and follow up from the activities ideas from the previous gathering, this gathering might consider:

Selecting a name for your Neighbourhood Connect group:

Discuss possible names for the group and choose one – if there are a number of ideas, this may generate a fairly heated debate.

Setting expectations and ground rules:

We suggest a group discussion on:

- What do we each hope to get out of this group and the activities we plan to do? (expectations)
- What will make it work? What will we need to do for success?
- How will we recognise success? How will things get organised? How often do we meet as a whole group?
- What don't we want? What concerns do we have – for example; prying, conflict, loss of privacy, becoming overburdened. What types of behaviour are not okay? What will happen if this occurs?

Write this up and distribute it to all members; these are in part ground rules to make your group work and to deal with potential problems. If people behave in a way that the group has agreed is not okay, they can be shown these notes as a first step, which will let them know what will happen if the behaviour continues.



2. Connecting with community partners

2.1. Partnering with community groups and services in your area

If you are part of an established community, it is likely that a range of community groups and services are already actively working with people in your area.

These organisations may include a Neighbourhood House, a service club, a community services provider, a church, a school, a scouts or guides group, a sporting club or a local council. These organisations may be striving to create stronger a community in their own way and will see their aims and yours as very compatible. Therefore, they may be happy to help. This is entirely optional: in some circumstances it may be an excellent move; in others, the opposite.

2.2 The advantages of working with a community partner

Working in partnership with an existing community service provider opens up opportunities to:

- Extending your reach by tapping into established organisations with strong links in the community.
- Gain advice and guidance on how to form a group, keep it going well and handle the challenges that may arise.
- Meet practical requirements to assist group activities – for example, the provision of resources (such as the use of a meeting room; use of a printer or photocopier for invitations) or by helping to promote your group's upcoming event or initiatives.

2.3 Identifying potential community partners

To find services in your area, look at the local council website for a list of community services, clubs and other organisations. You might contact the Community Development Officer at your council to make a time to meet and discuss what you would like to do and how they may be able to help you. The closest Neighbourhood House may also be helpful.

A phone call to the potential partner is a good way to start – you can ask who is the right person to speak to about helping local neighbourhood groups. Then perhaps make a time to meet with them, or talk on the phone if that's more feasible.

If your group has a particular focus or has a large number of people from one demographic, you might consider targeting an organisation specifically relevant to your group's needs. For example, if there are a lot of young families in your group, you might consider approaching a school or junior sporting club as a community partner; if mostly older people, perhaps an aged care service.



2.4 Negotiating the role of a community partner

It's important to explain to any organisation willing to assist, that each Neighbourhood Connect group is independent and the members will choose what the group will do to create a more connected neighbourhood. Help is appreciated and ideas or suggestions will be welcomed, but the community partner must respect the group's autonomy. If the potential partner can't agree to that, you should look elsewhere for support.

Every group is different and will decide which of the various ways members might connect. Getting together in person is ideal. You may want to have a regular social activity and /or a regular meeting.

3. Troubleshooting - anticipating potential problems

3.1 Not enough / too many neighbours coming along

There is no optimum number of people required to make a Neighbourhood Connect group a success, but if you feel you would like to recruit more people, start by asking each member to personally invite someone they know (or don't know) who lives in the precinct to come along to an event.

A friendly, face to face invitation is often enough to persuade people to participate where letter drops haven't worked. An occasional letter dropped invitation may bring in new neighbours. Other ideas include promotion via a local newspaper article, a local community notice board or local government community web page, but these methods may bring in people who live further away (we recommend you keep your group very local and refer others back to Neighbourhood Connect to support them to start a new group).

Make sure the gatherings are fun – perhaps the serious discussions can take place for only a short time or at a different time. You can give people the option of coming to a discussion at one time, followed by a fun activity at another time or just coming to the fun activity.

If you have the unusual problem of having too many people, try breaking into smaller interest groups to work on different types of activities or events.

3.2 Not enough members of the group sharing the load

Setting expectations for how the group will work together during the first few meetings will help everyone understand what is expected of them as a group member – in particular, that the group will only achieve its aims by everyone contributing time and skills over time. The Community Connector/connecting team might help this process along by inviting people to share their skills and ideas for a specific task.



3.3 Group members not responding to emails/communication

Suggest that people respond to emails within a few days of receiving them so that planning events and activities is not held up by lack of response. Including some interesting information, a weblink, appropriate humour in the message might also encourage people to look out for the email and respond in a timely way.

3.4 Options for those who don't use computers

For those who don't have an email address or use computers, suggest they buddy up with someone else in the group who might pass on messages received electronically by dropping in or by notes in the letter box or suggest the person stay in touch with the Community Connector by phone to be updated on upcoming activities.

3.5 Dealing with difficult behaviour

Communities are made up of all sorts of people with all sorts of histories and all sorts of personalities. Some neighbours have 'people personalities,' others keep themselves to themselves, some people are outgoing, others are slow to warm up and others are shy.

You will find most people to be positive, trustworthy, respectful and friendly. You may also find group members who, from time to time, are overly negative or aggressive, tend to repeat and exaggerate or interfere, overstep personal boundaries or perhaps don't do what they said they would do. As the Community Connector, it can be wise to wait awhile before commenting as people have all sorts of things happening in their lives and the situation may pass.

People tend to take on group norms so you might decide to compliment the group on an aspect of its functioning. If you decide that you need to gently let a person know about something they are doing that others are not happy about, choose a time and place that works for you and the other person. You can try asking how the person is experiencing the group, what they like about it and what they don't like.

This may allow you to discuss the problem without you bringing it up, avoiding a defensive reaction. Once you are discussing the problem behaviour you can seek an understanding of why the person is doing it. You may find that the person finds behaviours of others difficult also. You may uncover what the person would like from others and what they think they could do differently. If you can get a person to identify a change for themselves, it can avoid the last resort of you telling them what is needed. You might refer to the group's guidelines, if you have these, or ask what they would like to do to contribute more to the group. It helps to be very specific about what you want the person to do or not do.

At the end of the day, if a neighbour's behaviour is badly affecting the group and they have been unable or unwilling to change their behaviour, you have to put the needs of the group before the needs of that person and make the call they can no longer be part of the group. It's best to speak to some active members and agree on this, rather than have the Community Connector make the decision alone. Any acts of aggression can be reported to the Police.



3.6 Dealing with conflicts in groups

A lively discussion with differences of opinion can be a good thing if no-one takes things personally and the group is able eventually to consent to certain actions or decisions [see section on decision-making). You can structure your group discussions in a way that assists people to focus on the issues rather than on the people.

There are times when conflict can be discouraging and lead to bad feelings. Try to intervene in conflicts early, when they are just tensions, as at this stage it's easier to uncover any misunderstandings, understand motivations and, if necessary, agree to disagree. It's good to separate issues and deal with them one at a time. You can start with asking about needs and concerns, rather than just exploring positions on an issue – asking why a person wants a certain thing can be useful. 'What will that give you/us?' can be asked a number of times to get to deeper needs and concerns. Look together for a solution that meets those needs. As a conflict escalates, people can get emotional and negative, making it harder to sort things out. Call timeout when people are upset, identify a time to resume discussions and return to the issue when each person is calm.

Choose a good facilitator or call on someone with mediation skills to help. It can be useful for this person to not be part of the group, and therefore seen by everyone as neutral.

Try these links for further reading:

<http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/conflictbooklet.pdf> <http://www.crnhq.org>

You will find useful information on our website

www.neighbourhoodconnect.org.au

For further help contact the Neighbourhood Connect Manager,

Irene Oppen, at Irene@neighbourhoodconnect.org.au phone 0413 706 233.

Together, let's create a connected neighbourhood movement.