

# Communities of practice

connecting people to learn and share

how communities of practice can help local government improvement



Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

*Source: Etienne Wenger*

[www.communities.idea.gov.uk](http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk)

**Share it. Solve it!**

# what is a community of practice?

The Community of Practice (CoP) concept is nothing new; people have always found others whose experiences and interests are like their own.

A CoP brings these people together. They can share a common area of interest and a variety of **expertise and skills**, or have issues or **problems to air, share and solve**. Good practice and ideas are also shared to enhance the knowledge and expertise of the community.

A lively CoP prevents the repetition of work by **connecting people to people**, enabling them to share new ideas and develop new strategies.

This results in **faster problem-solving, less cost and duplication of effort** and extensive access to expertise.

## community of practice – a definition:

The concept of a community of practice (CoP) refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations. It refers as well to the stable group that is formed from such regular interactions. *Source: Wikipedia*



## a tool for local government improvement

In this fast-paced, fluid environment where the need to reach beyond traditional organisational boundaries exists, the IDeA Community of Practice website provides local government with a new tool for managing its work. It can assist in:

- solving problems
- sharing ideas
- developing peer and stakeholder relationships
- managing the effective flow of knowledge

This adds up to the facility to achieve sustainable self-development.

## what's in it for me?

**Q** The speed of the world we live in is getting quicker; problems come at us thicker and faster. We all need quick-fix answers. We know the solutions are out there but how can we access them quickly? It's highly likely that someone else has already been there and knows something to help us achieve our objectives. But who are they? And, how do we find them?

**A** The answer is through a CoP. Joining a community will connect you to individuals and their organisations to enable you to share problems, develop new ideas and strategies in a safe, online environment with like-minded people who possess a vast array of expertise and knowledge.

'I have been able to solve problems by networking with other members,' said Councillor Vincent Crosby of Sedgefield Borough Council. 'And I've been able to look at best practice.'

## how do they work?

### ingredients for a successful CoP

While each CoP is unique with a specific focus there are some essential ingredients required to make them work:

#### purpose

A CoP needs a clear purpose which is relevant and meaningful to its members. It should specify exactly what the community is for and what will be gained from being part of it.

#### facilitators

Every CoP begins with someone in the role of facilitator who will ensure that the purpose of the community and the needs of the members are being met through a variety of online activities and discussions. They welcome new members and keep the community vibrant and focused.

#### activities

Within each CoP there are a variety of activities, tools and techniques employed to aid and enhance conversations and the transfer of knowledge.

#### active membership

Each community will have active members with a lively interest in sharing their knowledge with each other.

## participating in a community of practice

There are many ways that you can participate in a CoP, as:

**Organiser:** Sets up the CoP and is usually the facilitator as well. Should you wish to set up your own CoP please email [communities@idea.gov.uk](mailto:communities@idea.gov.uk) for guidance and an application form.

**Facilitators:** Host the CoP; it's their responsibility to ensure that everything runs smoothly and that members' experiences are worthwhile. Any one community should have several facilitators.

**Experts:** Are permanent or temporary members of a CoP who share their expertise and knowledge.

**Contributors:** Actively participate in the CoP by asking or replying to questions in a forum, by posting documents, by writing a blog or in other ways.

**Readers:** Might be slightly less involved but nevertheless are valuable members. They will typically view discussions and documents but won't contribute.

**Share it. Solve it!**

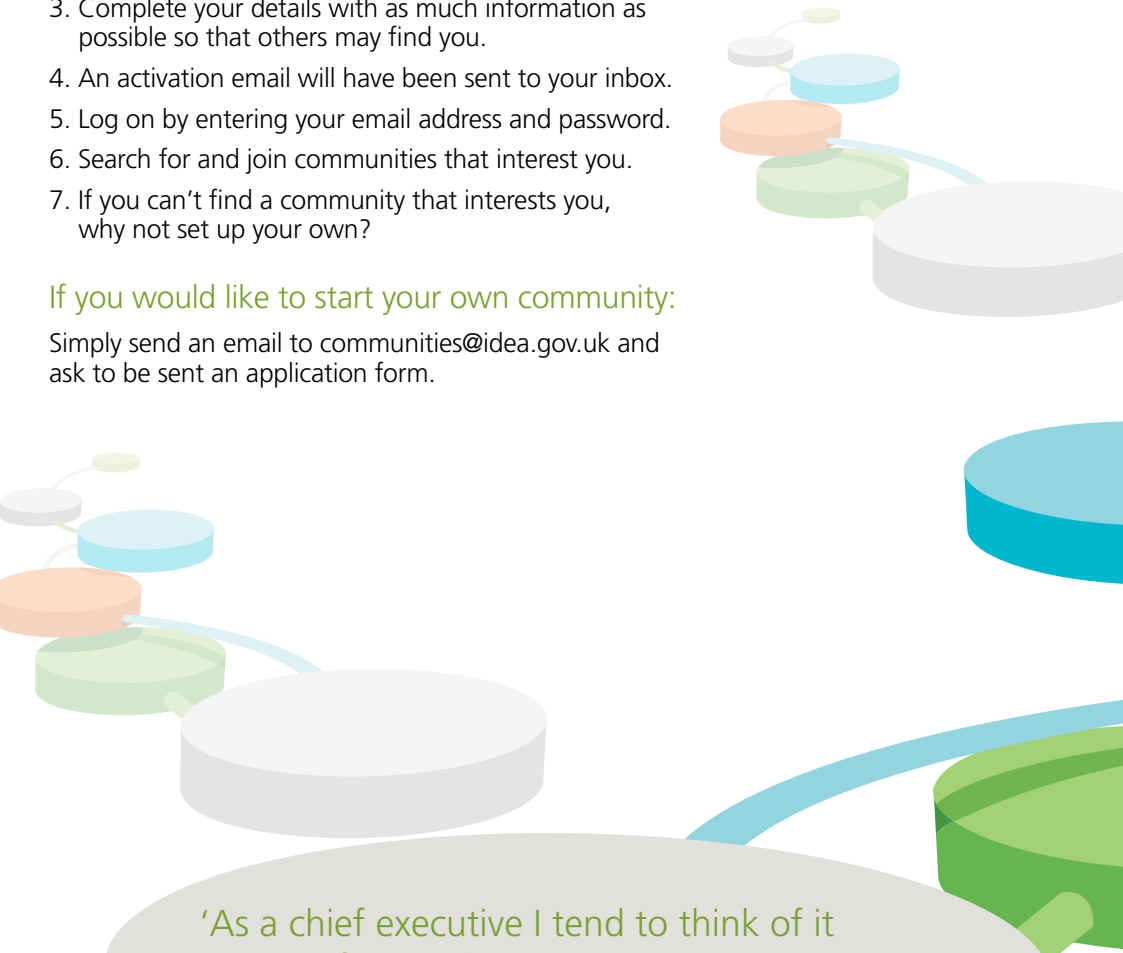
## what should you do now?

### If you would like to join a community:

1. Visit the website at [www.communities.idea.gov.uk](http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk)
2. Click on 'register' and agree to the terms and conditions.
3. Complete your details with as much information as possible so that others may find you.
4. An activation email will have been sent to your inbox.
5. Log on by entering your email address and password.
6. Search for and join communities that interest you.
7. If you can't find a community that interests you, why not set up your own?

### If you would like to start your own community:

Simply send an email to [communities@idea.gov.uk](mailto:communities@idea.gov.uk) and ask to be sent an application form.



'As a chief executive I tend to think of it as a way of expanding my organisation,'  
said Andrea Hill, Chief Executive Bedfordshire County Council.

# useful tools and techniques

Some of the useful tools and techniques you will find in a CoP are:

## forums

Great for asking questions or posting pieces of information. They are probably the easiest way for new members to get involved too.

## wikis

Allow you to add and edit content collectively. You might post a document for other members' input or amend those already posted on the CoP, for example a draft policy document.

## events

A way of listing all the upcoming events or meetings, which are relevant to the CoP members.

## document library

Upload, share and track documents, in an open or closed collaborative environment.

## blog

Entries are made, such as in a journal or diary, displayed in a reverse chronological order.

## search facility

Search for documents, wikis, blogs, people and events in your CoP

## hot seats

Access to an expert who sits in the 'hot seat' to answer questions.

## strategic panels

A group of experts and leading thinkers contributing thoughts, ideas and knowledge on topical issues.