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Neighbourhood Houses
The heart of our community

R.A.N.C.H.

**NETWORK
EVALUATION
REPORT**

2011

Produced for and on behalf of RANCH by

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DEFINITIONS

Throughout this report the following terms will apply:

Neighbourhood House - to describe a RANCH member centre/s

Co-ordinator - to describe a Neighbourhood House manager

Committee of Management - to describe Neighbourhood House boards & committees

Networker - to describe the paid co-ordinator/manager of RANCH

Aims of the Review

To gain feedback from RANCH members and stakeholders which will help to ensure that the future work of RANCH:

- continues to improve as an effective, dynamic, relevant and valued by its membership
- continues to grow and develop in ways which are compatible and sustainable with its funding and resourcing capacities

ABOUT RANCH

RANCH Objectives

To work towards the empowerment of Community & Neighbourhood Houses within the Loddon Campaspe region

To foster, develop and maintain effective relationships between all Community & Neighbourhood Houses in this region.

To provide a forum for support and discussion.

To encourage community participation in the development of government policies.

To seek the provision of comprehensive training for Community & Neighbourhood House staff, paid and unpaid.

To act as a resource and advisory body to relevant federal, state and local government authorities.

To exchange knowledge and information at a regional and statewide level.

To liaise with ANHLC as the state umbrella organisation of Community & Neighbourhood Houses.

Local Government areas covered by RANCH

- Campaspe Shire
- Central Goldfields Shire
- City of Greater Bendigo
- Loddon Shire
- Macedon Ranges Shire
- Mount Alexander Shire

RANCH Membership

- Bendigo Neighbourhood House
- Boort Information & Resource Centre
- Castlemaine Community House
- Crossenvale Community House
- Dunolly & District Neighbourhood Centre
- Eaglehawk Community House
- Echuca Neighbourhood House
- Girgarre Community Cottage
- Goldfields Employment & Learning Centre
- Inglewood Community Resource Centre
- Kangaroo Flat Community House
- Kyabram Community & Learning Centre
- Kyneton Community & Learning Centre
- Lancefield Neighbourhood House
- Lockington District Business Centre
- Long Gully Neighbourhood Centre
- Macedon Ranges Further Education Centre
- Maldon Neighbourhood Centre
- Maryborough Community House
- Mclvor Neighbourhood House
- Pyramid Hill Neighbourhood House
- Riddells Creek Neighbourhood House
- Rochester Community House
- Romsey Community House
- Rushworth Community House
- Tongala Community Activities Centre
- Wedderburn Community House
- Woodend Neighbourhood House

Funding

Apart from membership fees, RANCH is supported by recurrent funding under the Neighbourhood House Co-ordination Program (NHCP) administered by the Department of Human Services.

From time to time RANCH also receives grants for projects or community development activities.

METHODOLOGY

Following initial consultation with the Networker and RANCH Committee of Management, it was agreed that the evaluation process would focus on a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews based on a surveys developed by the consultant to suit the various stakeholders. This would allow for more open expression of comments and feedback and encourage a sense of ownership of the process.

RANCH Forum

On July 31, RANCH held a co-ordinators and committee members forum. One of the aims of the forum was to allow members to gather and clarify information about the review and to participate in completion of the surveys.

Surveys

Four separate surveys were developed to cater for the diversity of the stakeholders that play a major role in the network, including:

- Co-ordinators
- Committee of management members
- RANCH Committee of Management members
- External stakeholders

Surveys were designed to cover all aspects of RANCH's management and operational activities. (*See appendix 3 for copies of surveys*)

RANCH Committee of management members were interviewed collectively at a RANCH committee meeting on April 21. This allowed for group discussion and the opportunity to tease out issues and concerns.

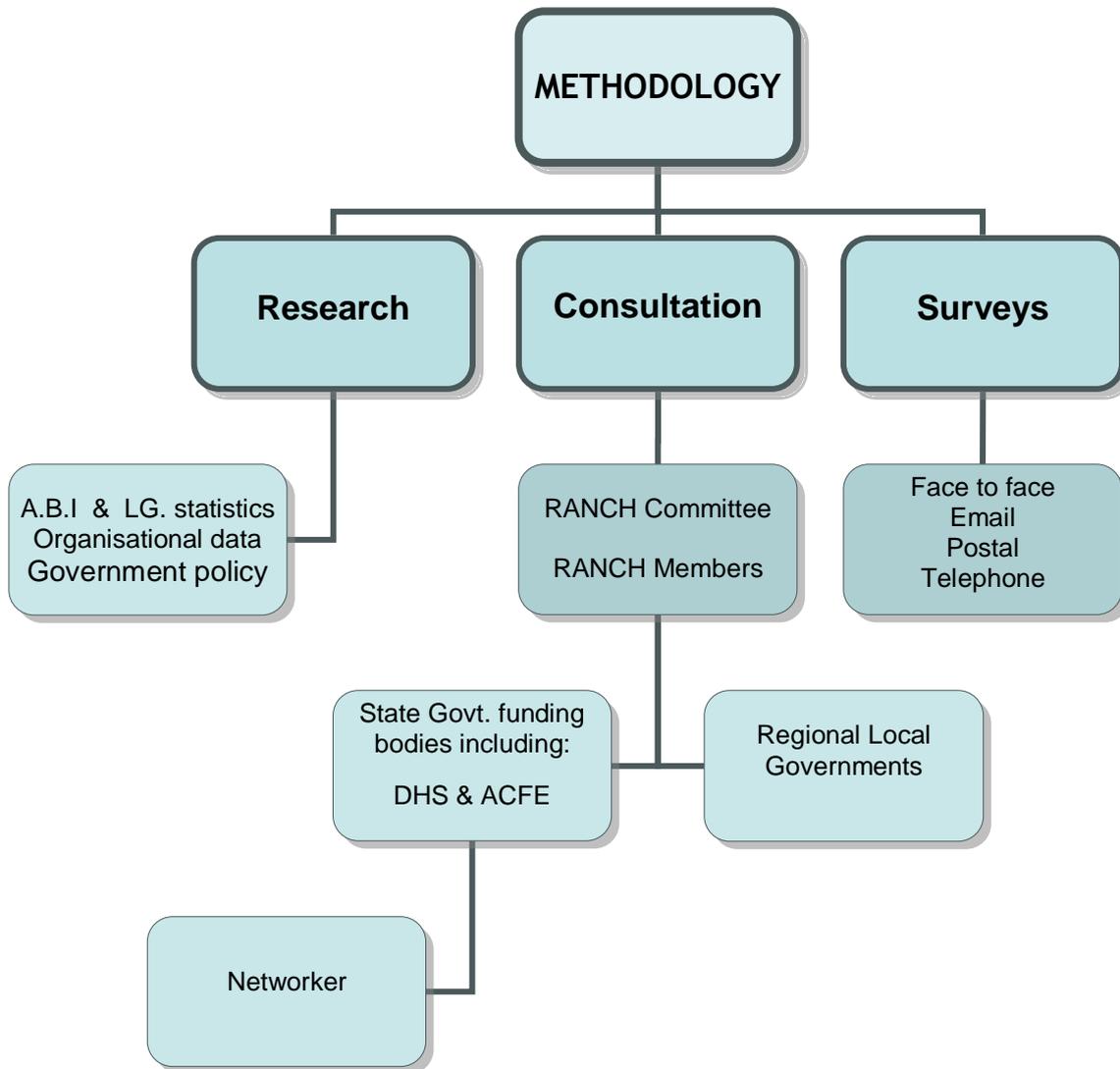
Co-ordinators completed surveys via individual telephone interviews (due to the geographical distance between centres and the restricted hours of operation that many of the centres operate under) or during the RANCH Forum (July 31).

Committee of management members completed surveys "in house" (often during a committee meeting) and returned to the consultant in hard copy or during the RANCH Forum (July 31). An average of 2-3 committee members per centre completed surveys.

External stakeholders were conducted via individual telephone interviews.

The Networker participated in a face-to-face informal interview.

The following diagram provides an overview of the methodology used for the evaluation process.



Number of surveys conducted

A total of surveys were completed for the review, made up of:

- 27 co-ordinators
- 56 committee of management members
- 5 RANCH committee of management members
- 8 external stakeholders

NETWORK STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES

Strengths

- Strong partnerships with a number of the local governments in the region, resulting in a collaborative approach to problem solving and support
- A well connected and professional Networker who is highly respected by members and external stakeholders
- A strong reputation among RANCH members for being supportive, accessible and collaborative.

Challenges

- **The significant geographical size of the network region**
This results in exorbitant (and largely unsustainable) travel and time costs for the Networker and a reduced capacity for members to participate in network activities. These costs are likely to increase as petrol prices escalate in the future.
- **Limited funding and funded hours of the Networker**
This results in a reduced capacity to provide direct training and support to members, and a limited capacity to engage in developmental initiatives and enterprises.

Any evaluation and forward planning needs to consider these challenges. Strategic directions need to be realistic and not stretch the workload of the Networker (or that of the RANCH committee) beyond their current capacity.

KEY FINDINGS

RANCH - playing an important role.....

A key finding from this review is that RANCH plays a valuable and important role in connecting, supporting, informing and advocating for the Neighbourhood Houses that form its membership. This view was expressed by Neighbourhood House co-ordinators and committee members, as well as external stakeholders.

The Network is often the first “port in the storm” for centres when things go wrong or when urgent advice or information is needed. Many committee members stated that while they may not access the Network directly themselves, they recognised the value that RANCH played in keeping their co-ordinators up to date with information and professional development. This is especially so for Neighbourhood Houses that have as few as ten funded hours available to them.

It is worth noting that approximately 85% of Neighbourhood House people who were surveyed rated RANCH’s ability to meet their centre’s needs as 7 or above out of a score 10. (see Figure 1)

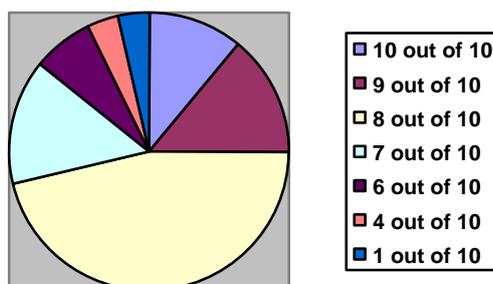


Figure 1: This graph shows the ratings given by respondents when asked the question “How well does the network meet your centre’s needs?” (1=not at all, 10=extremely well)

Connecting to committees....

A second key finding is that Neighbourhood House committee members are not as well connected to RANCH as they could be. It is reasonable that the Network puts its main focus on paid staff, as these are the people who require day to day operational support, information and training. These are also the people who invariably attend RANCH meetings and understand the importance of being connected with the broader Neighbourhood House sector.

However, committees of management as the “governors” of the centres, are ultimately responsible for overseeing their Neighbourhood Houses and ensuring that they meet the needs of their local communities. As with paid staff they need to be fully informed about their roles and responsibilities - perhaps more so, as they are less likely to be exposed to learning opportunities (in relation to good governance) outside their own centres.

Almost without exception, governance was named in surveys as an important training need or as an issue which needs addressing or supported. Many of the external stakeholders also commented on the need to support governance bodies in Neighbourhood Houses.

Yet, according to the survey results, fewer than 25% of committee members felt that they were fully informed about RANCH or understood what its role was in relation to their centre.

While it is impossible for RANCH to link with each and every Neighbourhood House committee member (especially those that are unavailable during the day), a greater focus on connecting to committees of management will help to build stronger governance bodies and improve their awareness of the governance support that RANCH is able to offer. This will take a collective approach from both RANCH, from co-ordinators (who are often the link between the two) and from committees themselves.

.....

In summary, this review showed that RANCH is operating to its capacity in ways which are fully appreciated and valued by members. Many of the calls for additional support or professional development training were made with the acknowledgement that without further funding to the Network, the capacity for growth and development will remain severely limited.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Promotion

- 1.1 **Increase the level of promotion to committees of management by:-**
 - holding regular quarterly or 6 monthly Committee Days
 - including committee chairpersons in all Network emails and mail outs
 - asking centres to include RANCH promotional brochure in committee induction kits
 - asking all committees to include a standing 'RANCH' agenda item for their committee of management meetings (which co-ordinators and/or participating committee members can report against)
- 1.2 **Improve and modernise the RANCH website to encourage greater use of the site and enhance information sharing. The requirement for passwords should also be reviewed.**

Services and Activities

- 2.1 **Produce a Calendar of Network activities and meetings at beginning of each year.**
- 2.2 **Continue to provide the current range of services and activities and consider the suggestions for additional activities.**

Training & Development

- 3.1 **Provide professional development training via cluster meetings rather than from one central venue to help minimise the travel time and costs for attendees. An additional fee could be charged to help offset costs to RANCH.**
- 3.2 **Outsource training to external stakeholders wherever possible.**
- 3.3 **Provide training which is targeted at beginners and advanced skill and experience levels to ensure that training is relevant and well attended.**
- 3.4 **Provide a sustained focus on governance training for committees of management (possibly via Committee Days)**
- 3.5 **Discontinue the annual 2-day conference.**

Governance

- 4.1 **Limit the terms of office of RANCH committee members to ensure that the committee remains dynamic and representative.**
- 4.2 **Hold RANCH committee meetings in Neighbourhood Houses across the region to encourage greater participation and awareness of the role that RANCH committee plays.**
- 4.3 **Actively promote the opportunities and benefits of participation in the Network committee, particularly to new co-ordinators.**

- 4.4 **Develop a Network Charter** which clearly outlines member and network roles, responsibilities, aims/objectives and processes and practices.
- 4.5 **Develop a decision-making policy** which outlines the types of decisions that the committee is mandated to make on behalf of RANCH members.
- 4.6 **Hold annual strategic planning sessions via Co-ordinator Days or Cluster meetings** led by RANCH committee.
- 4.7 **Provide written Networker reports to each RANCH committee** and table at following RANCH meeting.
- 4.8 **Conduct annual staff appraisals with the Networker.**
- 4.9 **Employ a part time Network bookkeeper** in order to reduce reliance on volunteers.

Advocacy

- 5.1 **Increase the level of reporting to members about RANCH advocacy work** by including a standing 'Advocacy' item on all RANCH meeting agendas.

Meetings and Networking

- 6.1 **Send out timely RANCH meeting agendas** which outline the focus and topics of the meeting to help encourage attendance.
- 6.2 **Revise the format of RANCH meetings** in consultation with members.
- 6.3 **Hold quarterly RANCH meetings** over a full day (and on rotational days of the week) combined with PD and/or Co-ordinator Days.
- 6.4 **Rotate RANCH meetings evenly around the region** throughout the year, possibly at alternative venues to Neighbourhood Houses.
- 6.5 **Seek membership opinion on whether "on line" meetings warrant further planning and expense.**
- 6.6 **Include a standing Cluster Meeting Report section** on RANCH meeting agendas to allow local issues to be discussed at regional level.
- 6.7 **Continue to encourage the Networker and/or RANCH committee members to attend cluster meetings** wherever possible.

Role of the Networker

- 7.1 **Ensure that regular succession planning for future networkers is undertaken** by RANCH committee and members.

External Stakeholders (Local Government)

RECOMMENDATION TO REGIONAL COUNCILS

8.1 Contribute recurrent funding to RANCH in order to increase the Network's capacity to deliver professional development training and support to Neighbourhood Houses and their committees of management. This should be seen by Councils as a cost effective way to enhance the capacity of individual Neighbourhood Houses to provide well managed and governed services and programs to local communities.

RECOMMENDATION TO RANCH

8.1 Strengthen relationships with Councils by:

- holding an annual (or six monthly) Local Government forum for Council officers and Councillors to meet collectively with RANCH Networker and RANCH committee members
- sending regular RANCH information sheets (or specific Local Government newsletter) to Council officers and Councillors
- engaging in relevant planning opportunities with Councils
- maintaining with regular individual meetings with Council officers wherever possible

External Stakeholders (DHS)

9.1 Circulate a regular RANCH Newsletter to external stakeholders to allow cross departmental promotion of RANCH and Neighbourhood Houses.

9.2 Explore ways in which DHS and RANCH can encourage greater support from Local Government.

9.3 Continue to work collaboratively with DHS on the development of a Neighbourhood House diagnostic tool.

External Stakeholders (ACFE)

10.1 Explore ways in which ACFE can provide indirect support to RANCH.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN DETAIL

1. Network Promotion

While 17 of the Neighbourhood House co-ordinators felt that they were fully informed about what the Network does and offers, 11 felt they were only partially informed (no co-ordinator stated that they were “not informed” at all). This suggests a strong need for increased levels of promotion about RANCH to its members on an ongoing basis.

Emails and newsletters are the preferred means of staying informed outside of meetings and are therefore the best form of communication outside meetings. A small number preferred “face-to-face” communication, but acknowledged that time and distance prevented this.

Promotion to committee members

In contrast, just under 25% of committee members stated that they were fully informed about RANCH and its activities. One committee member commented that she was unaware of RANCH at all until presented with the survey. Some left this section blank altogether.

It is worth considering the establishment of quarterly or six-monthly ‘Committee Days’, similar to the current ‘Co-ordinator’ Days, as a means of communication and promotion to committees. This will also allow a much greater interaction between committees and help facilitate governance capacity-building. *(See recommendation 1.1)*

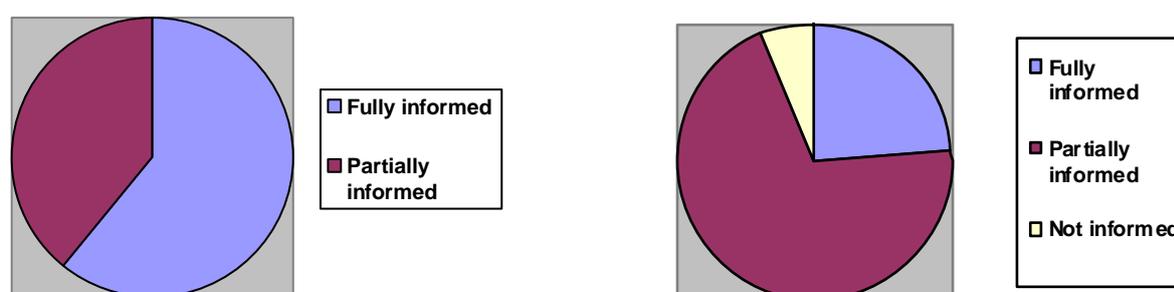


Figure 2 & 3: These graphs show the difference in percentage between co-ordinators' knowledge about RANCH (left) and committee members (right).

These findings suggest the need for a concentrated effort to promote the Network to RANCH members, particularly committees of management. *(See recommendation 1.2)*

RANCH website

A number of co-ordinators (and one external stakeholder) commented on the lack of effectiveness of the current Network website and the need for significant improvement. Given the geographical distance between centres, a well maintained “user friendly” website could be a valuable form of communication and promotion, accessible 24 hours a day. In light of the mixed responses to IT meetings, RANCH should perhaps consider re-allocating this funding towards the improvement and modernisation of the website.

A small number of co-ordinators commented on the need for the removal of a password, believing this to be unnecessary and a further barrier to the site's useability. *(See recommendation 1.3)*

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 Increase the level of promotion to committees of management by:-

- holding regular quarterly or 6 monthly Committee Days
- including committee chairpersons in all Network emails and mail outs
- asking centres to include RANCH promotional brochure in committee induction kits
- asking all committees to include a standing 'RANCH' agenda item for their committee of management meetings (which co-ordinators and/or participating committee members can report against)

1.3 Improve and modernise the RANCH website to encourage greater use of the site and enhance information sharing. The requirement for passwords should also be reviewed.

2. Network Services and Activities

There was a high level of appreciation for the overall services that RANCH provides to its members, with very little difference in the preference shown between the various services and activities on offer.

However, a number of committee members did not feel they knew enough about the Network services and activities to comment. Curiously, of those that did respond to this question, employment information and committee induction were rated least valuable. When queried, it seemed that these were not deemed priorities, despite governance being high on the list of co-ordinators' requests for assistance from RANCH. This highlights the need for increased awareness of governance roles and responsibilities. *(See recommendation 2.1)*

To help ensure that all RANCH members are fully aware of what training, services and activities are being offered, a calendar of events could be produced annually by the Network. This might also include key individual Neighbourhood House events and activities. *(See recommendation 2.2)*

Requests for additional services and activities by RANCH members:

When asked if there additional suggestions for training or if there are any issues or concerns that RANCH could assist members with in the near future, the following responses were provided (note that an asterisk = high priority):

- Assistance with governance issues (including recruitment of new members and staff/committee team building) *(See recommendation 3.4)*
- Fundraising, grant seeking and submission writing *
- How to attract and manage volunteers *
- Help with relationship building between Neighbourhood Houses and councils *
- Reporting responsibilities
- Advice on changes to the constitution

- Advice on industrial issues
- How to develop a strong community development approach
- Help with sourcing tutors
- Information about changes to child care funding and regulations
- Assistance with relocation to hub/s
- Development of a library resource for use by members
- Development of a standard set of policies
- Development of an induction kit for new co-ordinators & templates for handovers
- Assistance with conducting staff appraisals
- Tips on how to co-ordinate an effective Neighbourhood House
- Advice on becoming a Registered Training Organisation (RTO)

The capacity of RANCH to meet these requests for additional support will be dependent on whether RANCH can procure additional funding and support from external stakeholders, such as the Department of Human Services, ACFE and/or local governments.

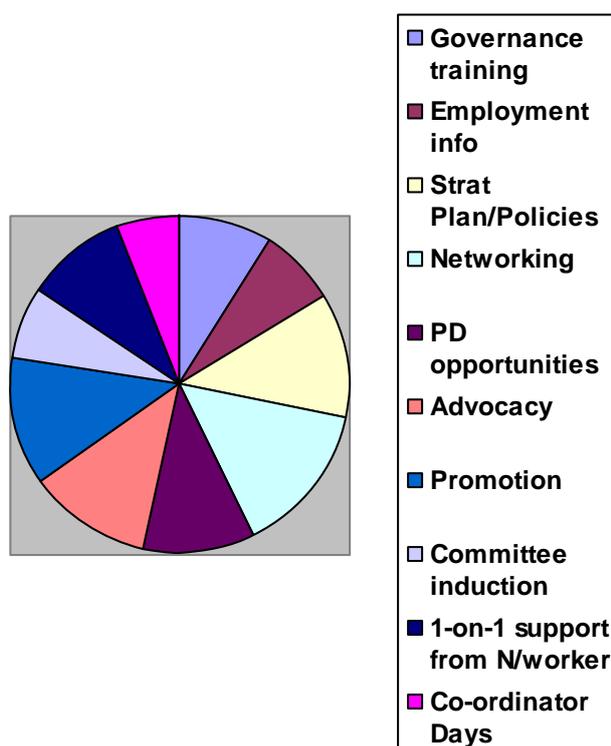


Figure 4: This graph shows the even spread of value that members place on RANCH services and activities .

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Produce a Calendar of Network activities and meetings at beginning of each year.
- 2.2 Continue to provide the current range of services and activities and consider the suggestions for additional activities.

Sample survey comments included:

“I really REALLY value the co-ordinator days!”

“Governance induction by the Network has been great”

“Its great to know that I can get just about any information I need from RANCH”

3. Network Training & Development

17 co-ordinators said they had attended a RANCH training session in the past 12 months, compared to only half of the committee members surveyed.

The main barrier to participation is the cost and time involved with long distance travel. For some of the remote rural centres a two hour training session will involve a whole day’s absence from the centre. Some suggested offering training via cluster meetings rather than from one central venue (usually Bendigo). A small fee could be charged to help offset the additional costs to the Network. Outsourcing to pro bono training providers may be a further option. *(See recommendation 3.1 and 3.2)*

Four people suggested that training could be better targeted at beginners or advanced so that it is more relevant to existing skill and experience levels. *(See recommendations 3.3)*

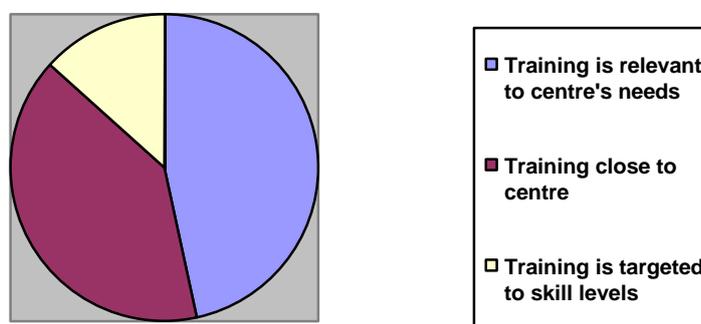


Figure 5: This graph shows the factors that would influence participation in future training.

Governance training

It is clear from survey responses (including co-ordinators, committees and external stakeholders) that governance capacity-building needs to have a sustained focus when it comes to training and support from RANCH when planning future activities.

Governance training was cited as a priority for co-ordinators, who continually grapple with the lack of knowledge and understanding roles and responsibilities by their committees from year to year. The fact that governance training was listed low in order of preference by committee members themselves further confirms this belief.

The Department of Human Services, ACFE and some of the councils interviewed also acknowledged this “gap” in training, particularly for remote, rural and smaller centres. All of these bodies indicated a willingness to support RANCH in delivering this training. *(See recommendations 3.4)*

Annual conference versus individual PD/training days

23 co-ordinators indicated their preference for individual PD days, rather than two-day conferences. Although many acknowledged the value of the networking opportunities that conferences offer, limited co-ordination hours and the difficulties of replacing workers for two days were cited as the main reasons for this preference.

Given this response and the amount of work involved in organising and hosting a two-day conference, it would be more sustainable to focus on the provision of regular Training Days and Co-ordinator/Committee Days as alternatives to an annual conference. (*See recommendations 3.5*)

Additional suggestions for additional training (provided by members):

- Recruiting and managing volunteers
- Grant seeking and submission writing
- Industrial relations
- Reviewing constitutions
- Time management
- I.T.

Sample survey comments included:

- “I have always found Network training to be of a high standard”
- “I would go to more if I could get someone to replace me at the House”
- “I particularly enjoy learning about how to improve our own Houses”

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Provide professional development training via cluster meetings rather than from one central venue to help minimise the travel time and costs for attendees. An additional fee could be charged to help offset costs to RANCH.

3.2 Outsource training to external stakeholders wherever possible.

3.3 Provide training which is targeted at beginners or advanced skill and experience levels to ensure that training is relevant and well attended.

3.4 Provide a sustained focus on governance training for committees of management (possibly via Committee Days). (*See also Recommendation 2.1 & 3.2*)

3.5 Discontinue the annual 2-day conference and focus on providing regular, full-day Training Days (see 3.1) and Co-ordinator Days.

4. Network Governance

22 co-ordinators said they are satisfied with the current Network governance arrangements. Many stated that they did not have time available for this activity and were appreciative of the work that RANCH committee members put in on their behalf.

Despite this, a small number felt that the Network committee could benefit from some “new blood” and a broader representation of members. Amending the Network constitution to limit terms of office for RANCH committee members would help to ensure that this occurs. *(See recommendations 4.1)*

At present there are two vacancies on the Network committee and enthusiasm by RANCH members to participate at this level is relatively low. Reasons given for this included:

- ❑ Part time co-ordination (not enough hours in the week)
- ❑ Cost and time of travel to and from RANCH committee meetings
- ❑ Lack of knowledge of the Neighbourhood House sector

Holding the Network committee meetings at different Neighbourhood Houses across the region, regardless of whether the centre is represented on the committee or not, may help to encourage greater awareness and participation in RANCH committee opportunities. *(See recommendations 4.2)*

Greater promotion of the benefits of being involved on the committee (‘What’s in it for You/Your Centre’) also needs to occur to regenerate the Network committee. For new co-ordinators, 6-12 months on the committee would be a valuable form of induction. *(See recommendations 4.3)*

Very few of the Neighbourhood House committee members were aware that they could represent their centre at RANCH committee level). *(See recommendation 1.2)*

RANCH Charter

The development of a Network Charter which clearly outlines RANCH aims and objectives and the roles and responsibilities of the Network and members, as well as decision-making and other Network processes and practices would help to clarify the expectations of Network members.

A Network Charter should be signed off by all incoming member committee chairpersons. *(See recommendation 4.4)*

Decision-making processes

At present, all committee member decisions are taken back to general RANCH committee meetings for members to endorse. This is a cumbersome process and takes up valuable meeting time and results in the perception by some co-ordinators that RANCH committees focus too much on “house keeping”. To help streamline the decision-making process (and in the absence of a Network Charter) a decision-making policy should be developed which outlines the types of decisions that the Network committee is mandated to make on behalf of members. *(See recommendations 4.5)*

Strategic Planning

The current strategic planning process appears to be ad hoc and not well understood by Network members. To help garner greater commitment to the Network, strategic planning for the Network could be led by RANCH committee and conducted at either a Co-ordinator Day or via each cluster meetings each year. *(See recommendations 4.6)*

Networker Supervision & support

At present Networker reports are provided verbally to the Network committee. While this is acceptable to the current committee, a written report would help to clarify the Networker's role and enhance accountability to RANCH members. A written report would also allow the RANCH committee to better assess the sustainability of the Networker's work load and determine where support or cutting back on work is required. *(See recommendations 4.7)*

Staff appraisals are also an ideal way of assessing and monitoring work loads and allowing for any staff issues or concerns to be dealt with appropriately. As this has not occurred in two years, this should occur as soon as practicable by members of the RANCH committee. *(See recommendations 4.8)*

Paid book keeper

The current arrangement for the RANCH book keeper relies heavily on the good will and time of a volunteer to take on a reasonably onerous and responsible set of financial responsibilities. As a consequence, the position is difficult to fill and can cause problems if the tasks become too time-consuming for a volunteer.

As RANCH funding is limited, it might be timely to consider a small increase in member fees to cover the cost of a part time professional book keeper. *(See recommendations 4.9)*

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 **Limit the terms of office of RANCH committee members** to ensure that the committee remains dynamic and representative (this will require a constitutional amendment).
- 4.2 **Hold RANCH committee meetings in Neighbourhood Houses across the region** to encourage greater participation and awareness of the role that RANCH committee plays.
- 4.3 **Actively promote the opportunities and benefits of participation in the Network committee**, particularly to new co-ordinators.
- 4.4 **Develop a Network Charter** which clearly outlines member and network roles, responsibilities, aims/objectives and processes and practices.
- 4.5 **Develop a decision-making policy** which outlines the types of decisions that the committee is mandated to make on behalf of RANCH members (.).
- 4.6 **Hold annual strategic planning sessions via Co-ordinator Days or Cluster meetings** led by RANCH committee.
- 4.7 **Provide written Networker reports to each RANCH committee and table at following RANCH meeting.**
- 4.8 **Conduct annual staff appraisals with the Networker.**
- 4.9 **Employ a part time Network bookkeeper** in order to reduce reliance on volunteers.

Sample survey comments included:

- “Too busy - no time”
- “I can’t fit another meeting in!”
- “I don’t know enough about the sector”

5. Network Advocacy

Advocacy scored second highest among the list of most valued Network services and activities by coordinators. Many commented on the lack of time that they personally had for this activity which heightened their appreciation for the work that RANCH does in this area.

However, a small number suggested that it would be useful to have more information about RANCH advocacy work and what the outcomes are. *(See recommendations 5.1)* A small number of coordinators commented on the occasional “doubling up” of advocacy by RANCH and the peak body (ANHLC).

Committee members seemed less aware of what advocacy took place and were less sure about its value to Neighbourhood Houses. *(See recommendations 1.2)*

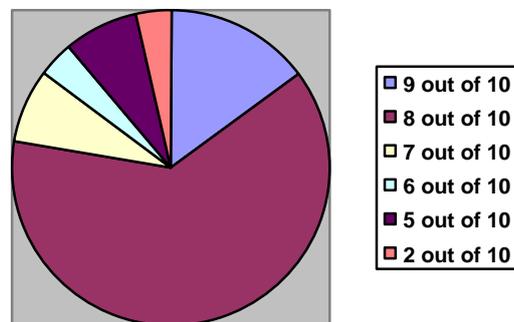


Figure 6: This graph shows the responses to the question “How well do you think the Network advocates on your behalf to the broader community & local & state governments?” (1=poor, 10=excellent)

RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 Increase the level of reporting to members about RANCH advocacy work by including a standing ‘Advocacy’ item on all RANCH meeting agendas.**

Sample survey comments included:

- “I don’t get time for advocacy, so its good to know that RANCH does this”
- “I definitely value this, probably most of all”
- “I’m not really sure what RANCH advocates about”

6. Network Meetings

The majority of co-ordinators commented on the value of networking and information sharing that RANCH meetings provide. Despite this, unsustainable travel times and costs, particularly for remote rural centres, result in sporadic attendance. This makes the relevance of RANCH meetings a critical factor in deciding whether or not to attend. Meeting agendas, therefore, have to be enticing and sent out in well ahead of time to allow co-ordinators to plan their attendance.

(See recommendations 6.1)

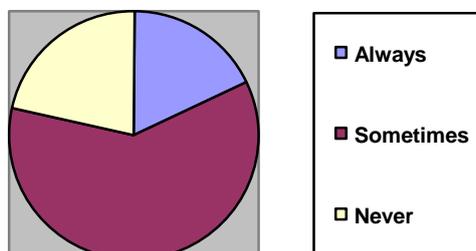


Figure 7: This graph shows the responses to the question “How often do you attend RANCH meetings?”

Format of RANCH meetings

A number of RANCH committee members and co-ordinators commented on the need for a revision of the current RANCH meeting format. Much time is taken up with reports and Network committee decisions that need member endorsement, as well as house keeping-type information (i.e. the secretary reading through correspondence). *(See recommendations 4.3)* which for many is seen as “time wasting”.

In view of this finding, it may be worthwhile, therefore, to hold a think tank session at a RANCH meeting or Co-ordinator Day to determine how members would like RANCH meetings to be re-organised. *(See recommendations 6.2)*

Frequency of RANCH meetings

Due to travel costs, the majority of co-ordinators surveyed indicated that they would prefer to have RANCH meetings held quarterly, rather than the current arrangement of every 6 weeks. Many suggested holding the meetings over a full day and combining them with PD/training opportunities, guest speakers etc. Others stated that they would like to see meetings held evenly across centres throughout the region and on rotational days of the week. *(See recommendations 6.3 and 6.4)*

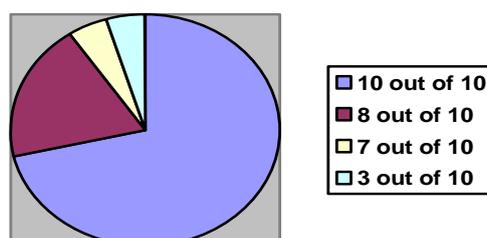


Figure 8: This graph shows the responses to the question “How many times per year would you like RANCH meetings to be held?”

On-line meetings

Responses to questions about on-line meetings were evenly spread between “yes”, “no” and “unsure”, the latter due to frustrations that they had experienced with failing IT equipment, leaving them unable to decide.

Some of the smaller and remote centres simply do not have the necessary IT equipment to participate which means that they are unable to participate regardless. Others stated that they preferred face-to-face meetings regardless.

There is no easy answer to this issue until all rural and remote centres have equal access to the necessary IT equipment and unless an IT system is in place which is fool-proof. Finally, there needs to be a consensus that the expense involved in setting up such a system is worthwhile. *(See recommendations 6.5)*

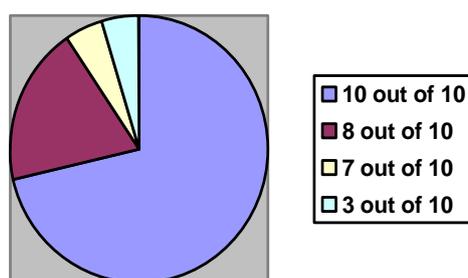


Figure 9: This graph shows the responses to the question “Do you believe on-line meetings have been an effective means of overcoming distance and travel costs?”

Regional cluster meetings

These appear to be more popular for some of the more remote rural centres (less travel and time and costs). However, co-ordinators in the Dunolly area prefer to attend RANCH meetings and have elected to discontinue cluster meetings in that area.

Suggestions for ways in which RANCH could add value to cluster meetings included:

- Having the Networker or a RANCH committee member attend *(See recommendations 6.6)*
- Taking issues raised at cluster meetings to the wider network for discussion and/or feedback *(See recommendations 6.7)*

Committee support for co-ordinator involvement in RANCH

All of the committee members surveyed indicated full support for their co-ordinator’s involvement in RANCH meetings and activities. Due to the limited funded hours and the need for the co-ordinator’s presence in the centre (rather than attendance at external meetings).

Only one co-ordinator stated that she had chosen not to attend RANCH meetings (with the full support of the centre’s committee) due to the lack of relevance of RANCH meetings to that particular centre.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 Send out timely RANCH meeting agendas which outline the focus and topics of the meeting to help encourage attendance.
- 6.2 Revise the format of RANCH meetings in consultation with members.
- 6.3 Hold quarterly RANCH meetings over a full day (and on rotational days of the week) combined with PD and/or Co-ordinator Days.
- 6.4 Rotate RANCH meetings evenly around the region throughout the year, possibly at alternative venues to Neighbourhood Houses.
- 6.5 Seek membership opinion on whether “on line” meetings warrant further planning and expense.
- 6.6 Include a standing Cluster Meeting Report section on RANCH meeting agendas to allow local issues to be discussed at regional level.
- 6.7 Continue to encourage the Networker and/or RANCH committee members to attend cluster meetings wherever possible.

7. Role of the Networker

An essential ingredient in a successful Neighbourhood House network is a skilled, friendly, accessible and professional Networker. The surveys indicated that this was certainly the case for RANCH, with 26 co-ordinators rating their working with the relationship with their Networker as 8 or above (out of 10). Co-ordinators and committee members alike commented on the valuable information and support that they regularly received from the Networker on a one-to-one basis.

However, it is vital that succession planning for future RANCH Networkers is undertaken. This should form part of the annual planning of both committee and members. This may include handover kits, revised job descriptions, procedure manuals etc. *(See recommendations 7.1)*

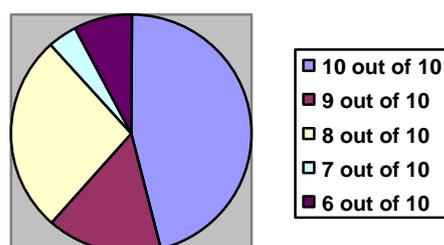


Figure 10: This graph shows the responses to the question “How would you rate your working relationship with the Networker?” (1=poor, 10=excellent)

RECOMMENDATION

7.1 Ensure that regular succession planning for future networkers is undertaken by RANCH committee and members.

Sample survey comments included:

“The Networker has been a huge support, especially during the flood crisis”

“The Networker is always helpful”

“The Networker is always there when I need them”

“We have an excellent relationship with the Networker”

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

8. Local Government

The following Councils were consulted during the review process:

- Campaspe Shire
- City of Greater Bendigo
- Loddon Shire
- Macedon Ranges Shire
- Mount Alexander Shire
- Department of Human Services
- Adult, Community & Further Education

Note that Goldfields Shire was not consulted due to the lack of a designated Neighbourhood House liaison officer or staff member who is sufficiently knowledgeable about the Neighbourhood to take part in the survey.

Consultations with these Councils indicated that the strength of their partnerships with RANCH varied considerably. In some cases, the relationships are reasonably strong and mutually beneficial varied considerably. In the case of Macedon Ranges and City of Greater Bendigo relationships are reasonably strong and to some extent, mutually beneficial. In other cases, however, the relationship is tenuous at best, and almost non-existent at worse (i.e. Goldfields Shire).

The main reasons for the absence of strong partnerships between RANCH and regional Councils appear to include:

- an historical lack of partnershiping between the two sectors
- lack of recurrent or realistic funding by Council to Neighbourhood Houses
- lack of sustained and targeted promotion by RANCH
- a perception by Council that Neighbourhood Houses are a state government responsibility

Council staff who liaise with Neighbourhood Houses (and were consulted during this review) spoke in positive terms about RANCH and expressed their appreciation for the fact that it does a very good job with limited resources. Advocacy, networking opportunities and information exchange were the main aspects of RANCH's work cited as advantageous to Councils.

However, the value of Neighbourhood Houses in terms of their ability to help Councils meet their broader vision and objectives is not widely acknowledged or understood beyond the designated Neighbourhood House liaison officer (where one exists) and rarely extends to Councilors. Often, the strength of the relationship is only as good as the level of understanding of the relevant staff person, which can change dramatically when there is a change of staff.

While some Councils provide grants and support to Neighbourhood Houses and/or RANCH, this is on a case-by-case basis and is reliant on the extent to which RANCH advocacy takes place. At present there is no recurrent budget allocation to Neighbourhood Houses by any Councils in the region.

As this is not likely to change in the near future, it would make sound economic sense for Councils to contribute, at least, to RANCH who are positioned to provide support and training to Neighbourhood Houses. This will provide greater value for the Council dollar and flow on benefits in relation to accountability, communication flow, governance and capacity building generally.

“RANCH can play a key role in co-ordinating pooling of LGA resources so that regional approaches can be taken when appropriate, rather than fragmented approaches on an LGA by LGA basis” (City of Greater Bendigo - survey 2011)

Clearly, the challenge for both RANCH and regional Councils is to build and strengthen their relationships - Councils, Neighbourhood Houses and local communities will be the beneficiaries. However, this takes time, energy and funding and unfortunately (as has been mentioned many times throughout this report) the capacity of RANCH to meet this challenge is severely constrained by the limited funding that RANCH receives. It is, in effect, a vicious cycle that can only be broken with additional funding and support from local government. *(See recommendations 8.1 and 8.2)*

RECOMMENDATION TO REGIONAL COUNCILS

8.1 Contribute recurrent funding to RANCH in order to increase the Network's capacity to deliver professional development training and support to Neighbourhood Houses and their committees of management. This should be seen by Councils as a cost effective way to enhance the capacity of individual Neighbourhood Houses to provide well managed and governed services and programs to local communities.

RECOMMENDATION TO RANCH

8.2 Strengthen relationships with Councils by:

- holding an annual (or six monthly) Local Government forum for Council officers and Councillors to meet collectively with RANCH Networker and RANCH committee members
- sending regular RANCH information sheets (or specific Local Government newsletter) to Council officers and Councillors
- engaging in relevant planning opportunities with Councils
- maintaining regular individual meetings with Council officers wherever possible

9. Department of Human Services (DHS)

A strong and positive relationship currently exists between DHS and RANCH, primarily due to a commitment by the Networker to ensure there is a good communication flow between the two sectors. Regular joint meetings take place and DHS indicated a high level of satisfaction with this arrangement.

A regular RANCH Newsletter (targeted at external stakeholders) could further assist communication and promotion and would be welcomed by DHS. This could then be distributed within the department to encourage greater understanding of the role that RANCH and the Neighbourhood House sector plays in building strong local communities. *(See recommendations 9.1)*

Although DHS funds the Networker position, there is recognition that this funding does not allow the Network to meet the diverse (and growing) needs its members, spread over a vast geographical area.

Although additional DHS funding to RANCH is unlikely to occur in the near future, DHS could support RANCH in advocating to local government for additional funding. This could involve joint promotions or representations to Councils. It needs to be acknowledged that this would be limited to the capacity of the current DHS officer and the RANCH Networker to undertake this task. *(See recommendations 8.1 and 9.2)*

DHS and RANCH are currently working collaboratively on a diagnostic tool which will provide indications of a Neighbourhood House which may be struggling (i.e. with governance or management) which will in turn allow for assistance to be provided before the centre gets into serious difficulties. Work on this initiative should continue to be supported by RANCH committee and members. *(See recommendations 9.3)*

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 Circulate a regular RANCH Newsletter to external stakeholders to allow cross departmental promotion of RANCH and Neighbourhood Houses.
- 9.2 Explore ways in which DHS and RANCH can encourage greater support from Local Government.
- 9.3 Continue to work collaboratively with DHS on the development of a Neighbourhood House diagnostic tool.

10. Adult, Community & Further Education

18 out of 28 Neighbourhood Houses currently receive ACFE funding for programs, which, together with local government, makes ACFE the next most important external stakeholder after DHS (which funds all of the 28 centres).

As with DHS, a relatively strong partnership exists between RANCH and ACFE, with regular meetings and sharing of information between the two sectors. ACFE indicated that mutual problem solving and strategic development with RANCH occurs on a regular basis.

ACFE does not currently give direct funding to RANCH, but acknowledged that support could be provided through the following:

- provision of governance training to RANCH and (all) Neighbourhood Houses
- assistance with collaborative funding applications
- provision of venues (at no cost) for RANCH meetings, training sessions or forums etc

The sense that RANCH gives the sector “one voice” is a valued aspect of RANCH by ACFE. This allows a better use of time, as opposed to attending individual Neighbourhood House meetings or RANCH meetings (that may not always be relevant to ACFE business). (*See recommendations 10.1.6*)

RECOMMENDATION

10.1 Explore ways in which ACFE can provide indirect support to RANCH.

General comments about RANCH from surveys

Co-ordinators

- RANCH is my “go place”!
- Always willing to help
- Extremely valuable resource - a great support
- The Network is a great way to learn from one another
- Its doing an excellent job on limited resources
- Its good know its there
- Relaxed meetings - people feel comfortable
- Very organised and professional

Committee members

- Very helpful
- Its working for the good of Neighbourhood Houses and the community
- I’ve found Network meetings very informative
- Great support for our co-ordinator
- Their professional development has been really good
- It needs to encourage other committee members to attend
- We have a very good relationship with the Networker

External stakeholders

- A very necessary body which can support Neighbourhood Houses
- It is a very good service
- RANCH helps council to meet its vision
- RANCH is a good resource to tap into
- Keep up the good work!

Survey Questions used in the review

Co-ordinator / Manager Survey

NETWORK PROMOTION

1. Which response reflects your knowledge about RANCH and its services and activities?

- I am fully informed about all aspects of the Network
- I am aware of the Network but don't know a great deal about what it does or offers
- I was previously unaware of the Network

2. How can the Network best keep you informed?

- Newsletters, emails
- Direct contact with the centre (regular visits etc)
- Other (*please specify*)
- Regular forums, conferences, workshops etc

NETWORK SERVICES & ACTIVITIES

3. What services and/or activities do you value most from the Network?

- Governance training
- Staffing & employment information
- General PD opportunities (forums etc)
- Promotion of Neighbourhood Houses
- Committee Induction (by Networker)
- Direct one-on-one support from Networker
- Co-ordinator Days
- Advocacy at local, state & federal government levels
- Assistance with Strategic Planning & policy development
- Networking opportunities (with other Houses etc)

4. Are there other services or activities you would like to see provided?

NETWORK TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

5. Have you attended a Network training or information session in the past year?

- Yes
- No
- I was unaware of any training being offered

6. What would encourage you to attend Network training opportunities in the future?

7. Which form of professional development would you and/or your committee prefer?

- An annual conference over 2 days?
- Individual PD days throughout the year?

NETWORK GOVERNANCE

8. The Network is governed by a committee made up of 5 representatives from member Houses. Has your centre been involved in the Network committee?

- Yes No Unsure

9. If your centre is not currently involved please comment on the reason/s why.

10. Are you satisfied with the current Network governance arrangements?

- Yes No Unsure (If no, please comment)

NETWORK MEETINGS

11. Do you attend RANCH meetings? Always Sometimes No *(If no, please comment)*

12. How many times per year would you like RANCH meetings to be held?

- Monthly Quarterly Every 6 months

13. Do you believe on-line meetings have been an effective way of overcoming distance and travel cost issues?

- Yes No Unsure

14. Have you any suggestions for improving Network meetings (particularly in relation to content and distance/travel issues) so that they better meet your needs?

NETWORK ADVOCACY

15. On a scale of 1 – 10 (*1 = poor, 10 = excellent*) how well do you think the Network advocates on your behalf to the broader community and local and state governments?

CO-ORDINATOR INVOLVEMENT

16. Does your committee support your attendance at Network meetings (and other Network training and events)?

- Yes Unsure No *(please comment on the reason/s)*

GENERAL COMMENTS

17. What is your general perception of the Network?

18. On a scale of 1 – 10, how well does the Network meet your centre's needs?

19. On a scale of 1 – 10, how would you rate your working relationship with your Networker?

20. Are there challenges or issues currently facing your centre that you would like RANCH to assist you with?

21. Are there ways that RANCH could add value to your cluster meetings and activities?

22. Have you any other suggestions for improving the Network's effectiveness?

Committee of Management Survey

NETWORK PROMOTION

1. Which response reflects your knowledge about RANCH and its services and activities?

- I am fully informed about all aspects of the Network
- I am aware of the Network but don't know a great deal about what it does or offers
- I was previously unaware of the Network

2. How can the Network best keep you informed?

- Via the co-ordinator / manager
- Direct contact with the committee (visits, newsletters, emails)
- Regular forums, conferences, workshops etc
- Other (*please specify*)

NETWORK SERVICES & ACTIVITIES

3. As a committee member, what services and/or activities do you value most from the Network?

- Governance training
- Staffing & employment information
- General PD opportunities (forums etc)
- Networking opportunities (with other Houses etc)
- Promotion of Neighbourhood Houses
- Advocacy at local, state & federal government levels
- Committee Induction (by Networker)
- Direct one-on-one support from Networker
- Assistance with Strategic Planning & policy development

4. Are there other services or activities you would like to see provided?

NETWORK TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

5. Have you attended a Network training or information session in the past year?

- Yes
- No
- I was unaware of any training being offered

6. What would encourage you to attend Network training workshops in the future?

NETWORK GOVERNANCE

The Network is governed by a committee made up of 5 representatives from member Houses.

7. Has your centre been involved in the Network committee?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

8. If your centre is not currently involved please comment on the reason/s why.

9. Are you satisfied with the current Network governance arrangements?

Yes

No

Unsure

(If no, please comment)

CO-ORDINATOR INVOLVEMENT

10. Does the committee support the attendance of your co-ordinator/manager at Network meetings (and other Network training and events)?

Yes

Unsure

No (*please comment on the reason/s*)

GENERAL COMMENTS

11. Are there particular challenges or issues currently facing your committee of management that you would like RANCH to assist you with?

12. Have you any other suggestions for improving the Network's effectiveness?

13. What is your general perception of the Network?

14. Have you any final comments?