

The NHS North West Leadership Academy (NHS NWLA) empowers people in the North West to secure better health, care and wellbeing outcomes through leadership. Wherever opportunity lies, within the system and across diverse communities, we work to develop compassionate leaders and the conditions for inclusive, future focused leadership.

## What are Communities of Practice?

Communities of Practice (CoP) are self-sustaining communities that bring together groups of people to work together to identify an area of focus, build a shared learning agenda and develop methods for collaboration. A community of practice has three elements:

- **The Domain** a field of concern and exploration, perhaps a problems to be solved
- **The Community** a group of individuals committed, through regular interaction and communication, to working collaboratively across professional and organisational boundaries
- **The Practice** members of the community are practitioners who are committed to improving their practice by sharing their relevant knowledge and experience

## Handy links

- [Wenger-Trayner, Introduction to...](#)
- [Yorkshire and the Humber Leadership Academy, Co-Creation Network](#)
- [Health Education England](#)
- [AHSN Network](#)
- [National Voices](#)



## Communities of Practice vs Networks

Networks and communities of practice are often terms that are used interchangeably. Is there a difference?

At first glance, there are similarities: both are groups of people with an interest in a particular field or area of activity, who come together regularly to discuss their shared area of interest. However, there are distinct differences, which have been explored by a number of commentators. Below are some resources which may help to shed light on the differences and relationship between Networks and Communities of Practice.

**Wenger and Traynor:** for Wenger and Traynor, networks and communities of practice are seen as theoretically distinct and separate social structures, though there is recognition that in practice there is often overlap.

**Meg Wheatley and Debbie Frieze: Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale:** Wheatley and Frieze focus on how communities of practice evolve from networks. Like networks, communities of practice are also self-organized. People use communities of practice to share what they know, to support one another, and to intentionally create new knowledge for their field of practice.

## Our Communities of Practice Journey...

Our 'Creating Conditions for Community' project explored the factors that enable people to connect, collaborate and work together across the system.

This project was driven by a call for greater opportunities to share knowledge, diversify voices, forge connections and build joint agendas to meet the ambitions of an integrated health and social care system.

Work kicked off with a research phase to understand more about the existing social and technological infrastructure enabling connection and collaboration, as well as people's personal experiences of community.

The findings from the research phase of the project were used to shape the design and content of a series of 'community-building' activities and resources exploring key aspects of community such as engagement, building trust and the development of a sustainable approach to community management.



[Read the full research report](#)

As part of this activity, a group was set up for interested parties to come together to discuss the factors that influence the emergence, growth and maintenance of communities. Members of this group contributed to a weekly newsletter, 'The Social Age Chronicle', capturing some of the evolving discussion on the conditions needed to support community.



[Listen to podcasts from the communities of practice](#)

The research also highlighted the importance people place on face-to-face interactions in community building and sustainability, and many participants expressed a desire to learn more about the art of storytelling as a key community-building skill. A community management train the trainer workshop and a storytelling event supported participants to develop the skills and knowledge to set up and contribute to communities of practice in their respective areas of interest.

**For more information on this research and how we can support you with communities of practice around key areas of work please email [nwla.info@nhs.net](mailto:nwla.info@nhs.net)**