

Working in the Framework Collective

Framework's common purpose

Framework is a collective of independent consultants working almost exclusively with civil society organisations. Currently there are five of us: Milla, Catherine, Alison, Órla and Jane.



Framework was set up in 1985 and initially worked only with civil society organisations carrying out their operations in the UK but now works internationally. Over the past three decades, members have left and new members have joined but turnover is slow, which provides stability and deep relationships. Framework members tend to stay for at least five years and some have been in the collective for very much longer. Since Framework began it has varied in size from four to eight members.

Framework's approach to consultancy is underpinned by our commitment to professionalism, client empowerment, social justice and equity. Members of Framework have a common vision that guides our work: 'Framework works for a strong and vibrant civil society which is driving change towards a cohesive, equitable and environmentally sustainable global community'. We try to ensure that all our work is aligned with this vision.

To do this we developed a Theory of Change that explains how our vision shapes our work. Our values of creativity, integrity and connection are at the heart of our work with clients, with each other, and with the wider world.

How we work together as a collective in Framework

Each Framework member is responsible for earning their own income and managing their own finances. We are not employees of Framework, and we do not draw salaries or profits from the collective. If we don't work, we don't earn an income (and that includes holiday and time off for illness)! Some Framework members have set up their own Limited Companies and others of us are registered for tax purposes as self-employed 'sole traders'.

Although we each manage our finances independently, we do have a shared bank account that we use to pay for collective expenditure including web hosting; email hosting; subscriptions for online services such as Basecamp and SurveyMonkey. Each member currently pays GBP 20 per month into the shared account and each time a new person joins Framework they pay a one-off joining fee (currently GBP 650).

So how does this configuration as a collective work in practice?

Identity | The Framework name provides a brand identity built on a collective and individual reputation for quality work. Hence most of our work comes through 'word of mouth' from satisfied clients. Our logo supports our identity and we use it to brand our resources and our website.

Non-hierarchical | We don't have an organisational hierarchy - however, we each take a specialist responsibility on behalf of the collective. At present those specialist responsibilities are:

- External relationships
- Membership (including finding new members)
- Finance
- Communications and marketing
- Information Technology
- Knowledge management & resources

Decision-making is by consensus, which can be time-consuming but usually leads to a thorough discussion of issues and a decision we are all committed to implement.

Marketing | The Framework website www.framework.org.uk is used to explain: who we are; our Theory of Change; how we work; who we have worked with; and how to contact us. We use a blog to share news about what we are doing and we provide access to some of our resources. We also distribute promotional materials to clients and other people with whom we work.

We collaborate on large work contracts (that we refer to as projects)

One of the major benefits of being part of a collective is that members can consider submitting a joint tender for a larger piece of work that would not be practical or, perhaps, desirable to work on alone.

When one of us becomes aware of a potentially suitable piece of work we contact each other to see who is interested in forming a team and contributing to the preparation of the tender document. A team can vary in size from two to four people depending on the skill set requirements and the scale of the work.

When we put in a joint tender, one person takes on the role of lead consultant and that person usually remains in the lead role throughout the length of the contract.

We provide mutual support and maintain professional standards

We use a system of peer supervision (that we call Professional Development - PD for short). Each of us is supervised by a colleague using a once-a-month call that normally lasts about an hour. We change the PD arrangements approximately every 18 months and when members join or leave.

We go through an Annual Review process that involves 360 degree feedback from our peer supervisor, our peer supervisee, our clients and the colleagues we have worked with on joint projects.

We organise two residential retreats each year. These provide an opportunity for members of the collective to:

- explore professional issues
- present case studies
- share resources
- experiment with new ideas
- develop our knowledge and skills
- socialise and relax.

Every retreat includes time for walking and we often combine the walk with shared reflection or fun activities. Two of us take responsibility on a rota basis for organising each retreat.

We have two development days each year and occasionally invite non-members to attend. For example, in Spring 2017 we held a development day exploring the issue of 'resilience' and we were joined by six people from

outside Framework. As with retreats, two of us take turns organising each development day on a rota basis.

We have monthly group 'check-in' calls lasting about an hour. One person convenes the call on a rota basis. We prepare for these check-in calls by each writing an update on Basecamp describing what has happened during the previous month (both work and our non-working lives).

We also have lots of informal contact with each other.

We care for and care about each other

One of the things that is special about being part of Framework is the sense of belonging that the collective provides. We genuinely care about each other and we have succeeded in creating a safe space where we can bring our whole selves into the collective. One of our members captured this beautifully:

"I love being part of Framework for the companionship, growth and opportunities. In Framework I feel accepted and valued as a whole person – not just for professional contributions. I care about the other members, as they care for me: we share our personal as well as professional joys and struggles. I've learnt from honest reflections that others have shared about their own work experiences, from observing how they handle things I would have done differently (and not so effectively), and from our experiments together with new materials and approaches. And we have fun and enjoy each other's company!"

Joining Framework

We have a detailed joining process that includes a 'probationary' (for want of a better word) period. The whole joining process can take up to six months and involves a significant investment of time – particularly for the Framework member who takes on the additional responsibility of supervising a prospective member. Until the prospective member is confirmed following a successful probationary period they do not have full status as a Framework member (for example, they are not added to the list of members on the website and are not given a Framework email address). When new members are confirmed after the probationary period they pay the one-off joining fee of GBP 650.

Why we love being Framework members

When the previous version of this document was written, Framework members were asked to explain how they had benefitted from being part of the collective and why they *loved* being in Framework. Here's what they said:

- An opportunity to be more thoughtful about my professional practice and values
- Company, stimulation and affirmation
- Substantial new work which I wouldn't have won by myself
- Somewhere for my various bits and pieces to 'land' e.g. interesting articles, resource etc – it has a sense of being a 'sandpit' where I can trial things, experiment, play with ideas
- Motivation (I'm slightly better at doing things when I have made myself accountable to others for doing them!)
- Broadened my horizons, professionally & intellectually
- PD sessions/annual review/strategic planning - timely, stimulating, thought provoking
- Stretches me - e.g. technology, content on collaborative projects, PD (both as supervisor and supervisee)
- Personal support during the normal vicissitudes of life
- I have a sense of belonging and purpose in all that I do, based in Framework's agreed vision and shared values.
- Our solidarity and mutual respect (as members) helps me to have confidence in what I do when working alone.
- I know that there is always someone I can turn to for friendly (and expert) advice or simply to listen and help me work through a problem.
- Framework's commitment to learning – both internally and in our assignments – motivates me to continue to pursue my own professional development.
- Provides a degree of structure in my working life which helps me to use all of my time more productively.
- Framework is simply a happy and uplifting 'place' to work in because it fosters friendship, companionship, and even fun, within our work relationships.