Janine Bhandol, Maria Giovanna De Simone, Niamh Tumelty and Lizz Jennings share their experiences of merging the East of England Members Network (formerly East of England Branch and CDG), and the South West Members Network (formerly South West Branch, CDG West Country and CDG Devon and Cornwall).

CILIP undertook a review of groups and branches in 2011, to gain a better understanding of the landscape in which CILIP members are operating. The East of England and the South West branch were asked to consider merging with their local Career Development Group divisions, in order to help identify merger models to be shared with other groups willing to take the same route. Having now completed the process, we would like to share with you what we learnt along the way.

What did you think about the suggested merger of branch with CDG division?

Maria Giovanna: I felt it was a good opportunity to bring about change. At the same time, the process needed to be defined more clearly. CILIP gave us the freedom to decide how to proceed. We therefore had to identify a strategy, plan carefully, and be ready to adjust our plans along the way.

Niamh: I thought it made a lot of sense - why join CILIP if not for continued professional development? Why should the work of the Career Development Group be something you have to choose as an extra rather than being integral to what happens at local level?

What happened next?

MG: We held a joint meeting between the two committees, talking about technicalities (finances, journals, web presence etc); what we felt the core mission of a merged group should be; and what activities we should aim to keep. We agreed that we needed to work together first, in order to get to know each other and enhance collaboration before launching a merged group.

Janine: I felt the time was right for change. We had been working closely together for the past few years anyway, and this seemed like the next logical step.
J: We wanted to be as inclusive and transparent as possible about the whole process, so after the initial meeting we put together a consultation paper outlining the vision and roles in the proposed new group. This was put on a shared wiki so that both committees could share their thoughts and propose changes or new ideas. There was a lot of positivity, commitment and drive from all concerned, though naturally some nervousness about the change process and what it might mean for individuals. CILIP has really dedicated volunteers, and everyone on both committees worked really hard to push the process forward. The wiki was very helpful in providing an open forum to do this.

L: Each committee discussed the idea internally, and when we were all sure we wanted to try this, representatives from the two CDG groups attended a meeting of the South Western Branch, and we talked about the practicalities of getting started.

**How did you form a committee?**

N: We surveyed members of both branch and CDG division committees halfway through the year to determine who was interested in staying on the committee, and in which roles. Sharing the results of this early poll gave plenty of opportunity for members to consider positions and discuss them with the current post-holders, so by the time we held our final joint meeting in November every position had been filled.

L: Annette had devised a structure in her original proposal, and we made some changes to fit our activities. We then talked this through with the branch, and in order to start the process as swiftly as possible, we formed a co-opted committee from the previous three, with the intention of holding elections after the first year. We wanted to give the new structure time to settle and have revised it several times over the year as we have begun to understand what is needed.

**What about finances?**

N: We were advised that the finances should be audited separately at the end of 2012 and could be merged following this audit. The Treasurer of the new group will need to keep the finance information from both committees for a certain amount of time.

**What problems did you encounter and how did you resolve them?**

MG: We faced some technical problems, for example the non-matching boundaries of the two geographical areas, and the need to allow Eastern CDG members to

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choose an alternative special interest group. CILIP HQ 
and CDG National Council helped us to solve these is-
ues. However, the main issues were psychological, with 
members of both committees feeling that the groups 
might lose their specific remits, rather than enriching 
their offer to members. We addressed this by commu-
icating openly, and keeping the two committees in the 
loop as much as possible.

L: It has been a steep learning curve, with all three groups 
having to learn how the others operated to ensure noth-
ing was left out. We have also struggled to publicise the 
merged group, although this is improving. The area we 
cover is extremely large, and finding meeting places 
which are accessible to all is an ongoing issue.

What do you think will be the advantages 
of a merged group?

N: The merger has been an opportunity to think about 
what branch and CDG division offer, what should be 
retained or added, resulting in a better overall offer for 
members in our region. Better communication between 
groups operating in the region will result in fewer clashes 
in events planned, and one committee means fewer com-
mittee meetings overall, lower expenditure on meetings 
and more money to put towards supporting our mem-
bers.

L: We are providing a more consistent offering of visits 
and courses over the region, and are able to run the 
same event in several different locations. We can pub-
lisce events to all members in the area, and sponsor 
events that benefit a large number of library workers 
such as Library Camp.

Was there a moment when you realised a 
positive outcome was likely?

MG: At the two joint meetings, I felt people were will-
ing to reach a positive outcome. After communicating 
by email and via the wiki, meeting in person made the 
difference, and it allowed us to find common grounds 
more quickly and easily.

L: There was a long, uncertain gap between the branch 
meeting and the first merged group meeting, but it was 
positive and productive and at this point the merger 
process seemed not only feasible, but also desirable.

What do you think the new group should do?

N: The new group should be able to create a network 
that truly reaches across the region - we currently share 
the difficulty faced in many branches that activities tend 
to be focused in a few locations. We need to continue to 
improve communication with members, providing regu-
lar opportunities for members to meet with information 
professionals from different sectors and different parts 
of the region and to work closely with special interest 
groups to cater to members’ areas of professional inter-
ests. Most importantly, we need to support members at 
all stages of their professional development, from new 
professionals through post-qualification years right up 
to the later stages in the professional career.

L: We were keen to continue providing a range of library 
visits, something that all three groups had previously 
been strong on. We also wished to extend the career 
support offer to all members, particularly since the 
changes to qualifications since 2005 have made routes 
to chartership more flexible. Finally, we wanted to be 
inclusive and welcoming to CILIP members across the 
region, and to encourage participation and professional 
activism, whether ongoing or occasional.

Would you recommend that other groups 
follow this route?

MG: Every group is different. It’s important to understand 
the people you are working with, and adjust the plan 
accordingly. If you ‘personalise’ the process, making it 
look less bureaucratic, you are more likely to succeed. 
This might mean running the process in a completely 
different way from what we chose to do.

N: I agree with Maria Giovanna, but would add that 
there are both advantages and disadvantages to merging. 
The merged committee will have a lot to cover if deliver-
ing opportunities previously offered by two groups, but 
I think this can be achieved, especially with the support 
of project teams that can include people that are not on 
the main committee. For example, as New Profession-
als Support Officer I intend to work with a team of new 
professionals from across the network to ensure that we 
are meeting their needs. This has the added benefit of 
getting new members involved in the work of the branch 
and therefore more likely to put themselves forward for 
committee vacancies as they arise.

J: I think one of the biggest things for groups to consider 
is that this is essentially a process of managing change. 
So I would advise Chairs or other stakeholders involved 
to read up on the change process and how best to man-
age it. Get some training if you can, and talk to as many 
people as you can who have undergone similar experi-
ences. Also, make use of CILIP – they are very support-
ive and have a lot of experience to help branches and 
groups through the merger process.

L: Working closely is a critical first step which makes the 
merger possible and has the potential to give members a 
consistent offer and opportunities to become involved. I 
would encourage separate committees to look for areas 
in which they can collaborate. Committee members are 
active, committed professionals and while there may be 
differences of opinion, working together is a great learn-
ing experience for all involved and can definitely bring 
benefits to all the members they are working for.

Feedback

We’re very interested in any feedback, and more than 
happy to share further details of our experiences. You 
can contact us using our regional email addresses: 
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