

The first “**Amateur Radio Skills Night**” was held in Danbury, Chelmsford in January 2014. The event has become a success, attracting an average of 50-60 visitors a month from around the region. In response to several requests for information on “the Skills Night Formula”, this guide is to help other amateur radio groups to plan similar activities.

The Background

The “Skills Night” concept is a variant of Essex Ham’s “**Foundation Plus**”. Foundation Plus was designed for clubs that are keen to nurture new starters, and is a series of themed evenings aimed at helping attendees to gain confidence, develop skills, and progress in the hobby. The “**Skills Night**” variant was created to suit a more traditional radio society that caters for not only new entrants into the hobby, but also to a wider demographic of society members.

Aims of Skills Night

A simple three-point philosophy guided the creation of the “Skills Night” format:

- Something for newcomers to help them progress
- An opportunity for established amateurs to share their knowledge, whilst trying something new
- A social event for chatting, sharing and networking

It was important to steer away from the style and format of traditional club meetings, so no lengthy announcements from a club chairman, no long PowerPoint presentations and no drawn-out club raffles. The Essex-based “Skills Night” is run under the banner of the local club’s training team, to provide a degree of separation from the main club activities, and to promote an air of learning and skills development.

The Skills Format

A typical Skills Night would be held monthly at a central location, perhaps for two or three hours on a weekday evening. No formal sit-down talk (allowing open chat and networking) and no need to arrive bang on time (handy for those with families or commutes). Free tea and biscuits all evening (with an optional donation to cover hall hire).

Each night should have at least one section dedicated to the following (*with examples from the Essex Skills Night*):

- **Newbies:** Something to help a new Foundation licence holder to develop (*basic HF station, Echolink demo, Slim Jim construction, software logging demo, “beginners corner”, antenna advice*)
- **Seasoned hams:** Something that a more experienced amateur could learn about, or may not be able to access (*Working satellites, Raspberry Pi, live data mode demo, software/hardware project, SDR*)
- **Wow factor:** Something interesting or impressive (*Obscure antenna, High Altitude Balloon demo, live ISS packet exchange, drone flight, RAYNET APRS tracker, lightning detection kit, Elecraft KX3 driven by a Raspberry Pi*)
- **Regulars:** An early approach was made to the local CW club to ensure a regular presence at Skills Nights. There have also been semi-regular visits from local repeater groups, RAYNET groups and local RSGB managers
- **Take-away:** Visitors should be to go away with something (*engraved callsign badge, Slim Jim antenna they made themselves, components purchased at cost, getting their handheld programmed with local repeaters*)

Running a Skills Night Event

The event should run by a coordinator who is suitably empowered to run and promote the event. That person approaches local enthusiastic amateurs and encourages them to bring something along for show-and-tell. Demos are to a small group, or one-to-one, so there's no need to prepare long talks or presentations - just to bring something along and sit on a table talking about it to passers-by. Some of the volunteers may be willing to go the extra mile and have a monthly theme, or perhaps offer a service (such as programming handsets, antenna advice, QRZ setup, etc). Local clubs/groups may also want a table, for self-promotion, recruitment or subs renewal.

It is helpful to have a dedicated "greeter", a signing-in book, and a printed list of who's attending.

With a high attendance and a low-cost venue, the donations for tea/coffee may be able to cover the cost of hiring the venue. If not, a raffle or a nominal admission fee should allow the evening to pay for itself.

A feedback form, questionnaire, or online feedback mechanism can be helpful, to gauge what topics should be covered at future events. It is also important to thank those who support the event, as they are vital.

Case Study: Essex

The society hosting the Essex-based Skills Night, the **Chelmsford Amateur Radio Society**, open the doors monthly at 6:30pm for a 7pm start, finishing shortly after 9pm. There is a 10 minute "gathering" at 8pm where the event organiser thanks the helpers, announces what's on each table and makes any other local club announcements. There follows a 10 question multiple choice quiz. Questions are pinned to the wall at the start of the night and projected onto a screen using a looped PowerPoint presentation, so attendees have pre-read questions. No prizes, and the aim is to raise discussion around the questions, which are often themed (band plans, latest news, controversial topics, etc.)

In January and September 2015, attendance reached over 70 people, with visitors from 5 counties attending. The event is heavily promoted using social media



Skills Night Promotion

The Skills Night formula works best if a) free, b) open to all regardless of club membership / affiliation, and c) promoted by local clubs, websites and social media.

A dedicated website or webpage with a short URL is also an advantage (e.g. www.sxham.uk/skills) and allowing people to sign up to an announcement mailing list can be very helpful, both for making requests for help, and for reminding people of upcoming Skills Nights or related events.

Forging links with relevant local groups pays dividends, so approaching local CW clubs, repeater groups or amateurs with a strong online presence is recommended. Word-of-mouth promotion, plus good use of Twitter (for announcements) and Facebook (for photos) is recommended

This document provides an outline of the Amateur Radio Skills formula. Hopefully it has stimulated some ideas for how your local club could offer something beyond a traditional club night to its members, local amateurs and new entrants into the hobby.

More tips and links can be found at www.essexham.co.uk/skillsformula