

Getting a group started

This information has been taken and adapted from resources developed by [The Resource Centre](#)

Why form a group?

There are many different reasons why you may want to set up a group - for example:

- There may be a specific issue which many people feel strongly about and want to organise collective action around
- You may have had a good idea and need some more people to help make it happen
- You may want to meet up with other people who have had similar experiences to yours, so that you can offer each other support, friendship and advice
- You may want to give an existing group a recognised structure in order to attract funding
- You may want to plan how to deliver your own services

What's the first step?

Just as there are many different reasons to form a group, there are many different types of group you could set up. It's worth thinking about what kind of group you imagine it will be, as this may affect the order you do things in.

For example, if you are planning to set up a charitable trust to run arts projects in the community, you will want to give some thought to the aims and structure of the group before you invite others to join you, so that you can be clear about what you are asking them to do.

On the other hand, if you need to respond quickly to a proposal from the council that will affect your area, the first thing you'll need to do is get as many people as possible together, so that they can all contribute their ideas and energy.

Though you may do these things in a different order depending on the type of group you are setting up, most new groups will need to:

- Hold an initial meeting
- Agree the aims of the group
- Write a constitution
- Open a bank account
- Decide who will do what

Each of these things involves several decisions and activities - here are some ideas and tips to get you started.

Hold an initial meeting

Here are a few ideas for making your first meeting attractive and interesting:

Publicise it well

The design of your publicity material is important. You need to think about who you are hoping to attract to the meeting, and make sure your poster or leaflet will catch their eye and give them a reason to come along to your meeting. Make sure the date, time and place of the meeting are clearly shown on the leaflet, and that it's very clear what the meeting is about.

If your meeting is going to be a large one, with as many people involved as possible, you will need to do as much publicity as you can. You could use:

- existing contacts

- flyers through letterboxes
- posters in shop windows or on community noticeboards
- leaflets in places where the people you want to reach are likely to go
- a letter or advert in a community newsletter
- a piece in the local paper
- an announcement on the local radio

If your group is going to be quite small, for example a residents' association for a single block of flats or people using a specific service, it is worth investing the time to call on people to invite them to the meeting personally. Even if they don't come, this will give you useful information about whether they think the group is a good idea and what they want it to do.

You can design and print your publicity at a local organisation such as a Council for Voluntary Services. NSUN is able to provide guidance on writing a news release and some useful addresses for local media contacts.

Offer an incentive

Not many people enjoy meetings, and for some it is a big effort to arrange childcare or transport, so it's a good idea to offer an extra attraction. This could simply be free refreshments, or perhaps a video or speaker about something to do with the group's aims or activity.

Think about the venue and facilities

Is it accessible to everyone? Are there steps or other barriers you should warn people about on the publicity leaflet? Will you need to put up signs to direct people as they arrive? Would it make things easier if you had a PA system or induction loop? Will you need to organise a crèche or offer help with childcare costs? Might you need a sign language interpreter? If you have a speaker, will they need a data projector?

Think about the agenda

The amount of preparation you need to do before the meeting will depend on the type of group it is, but it's always good to have some idea of what needs to be covered in the meeting.

A typical agenda for an initial meeting would include:

- Welcome and introductions
- Aims of the group
- Name of the group
- Plans and ideas (and who will carry them out)
- Who will do what (responsibilities in general)
- Finances
- Date and time of the next meeting

If you have called the meeting, people will be expecting you to act as chair. If it's going to be a large meeting and you are not confident in this role, it may be worth asking someone else to chair the meeting - perhaps a local councillor, teacher, religious leader or well-known community figure. But be careful that your choice of chair is not going to cause controversy in the meeting.

Involve everyone in the discussion

While it's important to appear well-organised, you also want to let people know that their contribution is needed and valuable, so make sure you don't close off

discussion too quickly. The people who have come along to the meeting are the future members of the group, and you need to make sure the atmosphere of this meeting is as welcoming and open as possible.

NSUN can provide guidance on different facilitation techniques and styles and involvement resources http://www.nsun.org.uk/get-involved/survivor_involvement/.

Take minutes

The minutes of your meeting don't have to be very detailed, but they should include a clear note of any decisions made at the meeting, and in particular who has agreed to take on which jobs. It's not easy to chair a meeting and take minutes at the same time, so ask for a volunteer to take notes at the start of the meeting.

Gather names and addresses

Make sure you take contact details from everyone who wants to be kept in touch with the group - prepare a sheet in advance which you can pass round the meeting or have on a table at the door.

Set a date for the next meeting

It's worth allowing some time in the meeting, so that you can discuss how often you want the group to meet, whether daytime or evening meetings are best suited to the members of your group, whether you need to offer childcare or transport to enable people to attend meetings, and so on.

It's not always possible to agree a meeting date that everyone can make, but it's important to make sure you aren't always excluding the same people just because you haven't thought about their needs.

Agree the aims of the group

It's a good idea to talk about the aims of the group at this first meeting, so that everyone is clear from the start about what the group is for. Make sure someone writes down what the meeting has agreed and check that everyone is happy with the wording.

Write a constitution

You may want to include your aims in a written constitution, and it's worth inviting a few people to volunteer to work on this and bring a draft back to the group.

If you are going to apply for grant funding, you will probably need a written constitution, to show funders that you are an organised group. Unless you are going to be a registered charity or a limited company, there are no legal rules about what your constitution should say. You can find the different types of constitutions for different types of groups on the Charity Commission website

http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/start_up_a_charity/guidance_on_registering/mgds.aspx

Once you have written and agreed the constitution, however, it becomes the 'governing document' of your group, and it should set out clearly how you intend to run your group. A good constitution can help to resolve disputes and enable new members to participate fully in the running of the group.

NSUN has information about different types of governance structures on its website <http://www.nsun.org.uk/members-resources/governance/>

Open a bank account

Running any group costs money and it's a good idea to start thinking at the beginning about where to get it from and how to look after it. As soon as your group has some money, you will want to give one person responsibility for keeping track of it (the Treasurer).

Having a group bank account is the best way to make sure the group's money is kept safely. Most high street banks offer special accounts for community groups. You will need to have at least two members of the group willing to act as signatories. Funders usually require (and it's a sensible precaution in any case) that you have a bank account where each cheque has to be signed by two people.

Decide who will do what

You may want to elect a committee with named officers (Chair, Secretary etc), or just share out the work that needs doing immediately. Either way, everyone needs to know who is doing what, and when they will report back to the whole group.

How formal?

There is no right or wrong way to run a group - how formal your group will be depends on the wishes of the people involved and the aims and function of the group. Many groups change their structure as they develop, so there's no need to get bogged down in legal documents before you've even got off the ground. On the other hand, it's worth giving the structure of your group some thought every now and then, to make sure you still have a set up that meets the needs of your group.

NSUN has information about its own governance structure on the website and roles of trustees: <http://www.nsun.org.uk/about-us/how-we-can-help/nsun-trustees/>

Charity Commission:

http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/About_us/About_charities/Trusteeship_index.aspx
<http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Publications/cc3.aspx>

Companies House: <http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk/>

Cooperatives UK: <http://www.uk.coop/>

Social Enterprise UK: <http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/>

Community Interest Companies: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/cicregulator/>

What next?

Each group has its own strengths and weaknesses, but there are several common issues most community groups need to deal with as they carry out their activities. Here are some useful pointers to information and resources that might help:

Raising money

We publish information sheets on:

- Raising Money
- Fundraising from local businesses
- Fundraising applications
- Monitoring and Evaluation

NSUN can provide further information and guidance on the above.

Finding a place to meet

A local Council of Voluntary Services www.hcvs.org.uk/ will be able to help find cheap or free places to meet.

Publicity and communications

The CVS may have equipment for community groups to use to design, photocopy or print your leaflets, newsletters, letters and posters.

We also have a fax machine and computers you can use if you have no office facilities of your own.

The CVS will also maintain a directory of community newsletters published in your area. This may be useful if you want to publicise your new group in a particular area, or let others know about your own newsletter.

Organising events

It is worth researching where you can hire or borrow equipment for events and activities.

Again, your local CVS should be able to help and suggest sources and general planning for events.

We publish some useful information sheets for groups organising events:

Involving volunteers

Volunteer Bureaus should have useful good practice guides to working with volunteers, which includes tips on involving people as well as sample policies and forms. You can advertise for volunteers at your Volunteer Bureau.

Setting up a new group or organisation will involve a variety of work and there are a number of things you will need to consider. The more aware of what you need to do the easier the task will be. Forethought and good planning at this stage can save a lot of wasted effort or work later. There are a lot of people with the expertise you need who can advise you and agencies that can help you. It has all been done before so you should be able to build on other peoples experience and resources. How you organise yourselves is up to you but there is recognised good practice and those your organisation needs to work with (like your bank manager, funders, members and the Inland Revenue) may have requirements that you have to work within.

You may already have got a lot of work done in setting yourselves up. However it is good to check that there are not things you are missing or a better way of going about what you are setting out to do. Have a look at the list of questions below if only to reassure yourself that you have got it all set up right.

Key Questions

What do we want to do?

What exactly will the group that you are setting up do? Is it just for those involved, its members? Is there a service you are offering to the community at large? What do you aim to accomplish? How will you know if you are being successful?

Where do we want to do it?

Where are you going to be based? What area will your organisation cover - geographical or other? You could start locally and gradually expand rather than take too much on from the start.

Who do we want to do it with?

Who are your potential customers or members? Do they want what you are offering?

Is there a proven need for what you intend to provide. You may be the only ones interested in 'parascending' in your area.

Are we overlapping with other groups?

Are there organisations that already offer what you intend to provide? Duplicating a service can be expensive, a waste of resources and create ill feeling with those you compete with. Funders will not want to be a part of that. Joining an existing organisation and working with them saves a lot of hard work setting yourselves up and getting everything off the ground.

Could we work in partnership with any other groups or organisations?

If there are groups already doing something similar you might work together to develop something new or set up a group for them in your area if they do not already reach there. You might share resources, premises and expertise.

Do we have the time, energy, and commitment to do the work ourselves?

You may already have a core group of people who want to come together to form this organisation. If you all have the time, energy and commitment to do everything yourselves you can get going. If you need a lot more volunteers or other expertise you will have to be sure you can get this help. There are dangers of just getting together a team of planners who are not able to do the work themselves, or equally a group of capable volunteers with no one who has leadership or management skills. Community pages in local newspapers, local radio, notice boards in community buildings, libraries, schools, colleges, and health centres are all good places to let people know what you are doing and to ask for people to join in.

Do we have a plan for action?

If everyone does what they want to do it is unlikely that the whole job of setting up your organisation will get done. You need to be clear about all the jobs you will need to do and who is going to take on what. It is important to know when people are going to get these jobs done by and what help or support they will need to complete these tasks. A Plan of Action will tell your members, supporters, and other interested people, what you are doing, why, and how you will go about it. You will need a plan if you apply for a grant.

Your plan should explain:

- What your group intends to do - Objectives
- How it intends to do it - Methods
- The resources it has available (e.g. people's time and support; any special skills; money; equipment; use of premises etc.)
- Any further resources it needs, and how it hopes to find them (e.g. by finding volunteers or raising money)
- How soon it hopes to do things - Timetable.

Drawing up a plan will help you to decide on priorities. For example, it might show that you have the resources to start one youth club, but not both; or that you need more money before you recruit more volunteers. The plan will also mean that you can measure your achievements because you will be able to compare what you planned with what the organisation has actually done.

Terms of Reference may be drawn up for the planning group before you look at a constitution. (See attached).

Do we need a Constitution?

Everyone will have different ideas about what your organisation is doing and how to go about it. If you do not have a set of rules you might be surprised to find you are all pulling in different directions and trying to achieve different things. Getting a constitution gets everyone clear about what you intend to do. Lots of constitutions have been written before and to get one off the shelf rather than invent it all yourself works for most groups. It ensures that important bits are not left out and it is an opportunity for everything you need to think about to get discussed.

Do we need a Committee?

A constitution usually defines the governing body of an organisation as a Committee. You will at least need someone to Chair the meetings, someone to write down what happens at meetings a Secretary and someone who looks after the money, a Treasurer. You can add other Committee Members with or without specific roles and duties.

What is a General Meeting?

All those involved in an organisation are usually members. Since it is run for them it is they who usually ultimately say how it is all organised. At the first General Meeting you should adopt your constitution and elect the Committee Members and Officers. You will normally have at least one General Meeting (Annual General Meeting) a year to complete business, authorise what the committee does and elect members and officers for the Committee for the forthcoming year.

Do we need a Bank Account?

You will need to have a way of handling your groups money. For this reason it is useful to open a bank account. The account should be opened in the name of the group and should have 2 signatories for all cheques. It is often a good idea for groups to have 3 or 4 signatories on an account of whom any 2 can sign cheques to cover when committee members are on holiday or unable to sign cheques for the group. If your group or service is to be hosted by another organisation then a constitution will not be necessary unless you plan to become independent of your host sometime in the future.

Do we need to consider equal opportunities?

It is good practice to consider equal opportunities before applying for funding. A funder may ask to see your Equal Opportunities policy statement and if you do not have one or worse still never considered the issues involved it could mean your application is rejected out of hand. This would waste a lot of effort. It would be good to discuss Equal Opportunities rather than just borrow another organisation's policy statement so that you explore what issues of ethnicity/race, religion, gender and sexuality, ability/disability, age etc. are relevant to your group or organisation. When these have been discussed referring to a draft policy from elsewhere may be helpful in identifying issues you might have missed.

Does our work involve children and young people or vulnerable adults?

It is a requirement by law that those who work with children, young people and vulnerable adults are checked by their employer or the organisation they undertake work for, as a volunteer.

The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) - Disclosure service

The CRB Disclosure service provides a regulated 'one stop' service for England and Wales offering access to records held by the police, together with those held by the Department of Health (DH) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The Disclosure service enables organisations to make more thorough recruitment checks, particularly for positions that involve regular contact with children and vulnerable adults. There is help and information about related matters on the Disclosure service website is at: <http://www.crb.gov.uk/>

Child Protection Policy

For advice on good practice, consult either the Every Child Matters website (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk) or the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (www.ncvcco.org, 0207 833 3319) who have produced 'Positively Safe: a guide to developing safeguarding procedures', published 2005.

Other help

Further help with setting up Community Groups and Voluntary Organisations can be gained from your local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO) (ie Community Action Voluntary Action, Council for Voluntary Service). To contact your local LIO go to the NAVCA website www.navca.org.uk to find their details. Your local LIO or Council will be able to tell you how you can find out about grants from local trusts, your local council and other local sources.