



Starting a New Community Group

If you are thinking about starting a new community group this factsheet will help you decide the best way to proceed

Before you start

Before you start you will need to think about what you want to do, why, how and who will benefit from your group. This section will list some of the things you need to think about. Thinking about the questions in this section will also help you to decide whether there is a real need for the group. If there is not, you will find it difficult to get support and setting up and running the organisation will be hard.

You may need to do some basic research, to find some evidence for the need for your group. Try to imagine yourself as someone totally new to the idea and think about what you would need to know to be convinced that it is a good idea. The questions below give you a starting point.

What do you want to do?

You will probably have a good idea of your overall aim in setting up the group, but it is important to really think this through. You need to be specific about what exactly the group will want to do, and what you plan to do in order to achieve this:

- Will it offer a service to everyone or a certain group of people or will it be of benefit solely to its members?
- What are the aims of the group?
- How do you want to achieve them?

Where do you want to do it?

Voluntary organisations vary in size from a support group covering a local neighbourhood to major international charities like Oxfam. Deciding on the geographical area you want to cover will be a balance between identifying where the need is and what resources you have available to do the work. You may want to work on a large scale but only have the people and the money to cover your local area, in which case, start small and work up – do not overstretch yourselves.

Who will benefit from your group?

Will your services be open to everyone within the geographical area covered? Or will you provide a service for a particular group of people – those affected by a specific issue, for example? Defining your user group is an important part of planning your new organisation. Don't forget that you will almost certainly have limited resources. If the community has a special need or is particularly vulnerable then you will need to take this into account in your service and funding plans.

Is anyone else doing it already? If there is already an organisation in your area doing the same kind of work as you plan to do, you need to consider carefully whether there is really a need for the new group. You may not like the way that an existing organisation is providing their service, but setting up in direct competition is rarely successful. Consider talking to the existing organisation about your ideas. You may find that they have good reasons for working in the way they do or they may want to work with you to improve their service. Duplicating work will not help either group when it comes to getting support, funding or volunteers. There needs to be something new and unique about your organisation, or you are likely to find it difficult.

Could you work with other groups? If there is a group outside the geographical area you want to cover doing the same kind of work, perhaps you could work with them to set up and run your new group. If there are similar groups (with whom your work does not overlap too much) in the same geographical area, maybe you could share premises or meet to discuss work.

What will your group be called?

This is often one of the hardest bits to get right when setting up a new group. Good names are:

- Available – some names are already registered. If you are considering registering as a charity you cannot use a name that is the same or too similar to an existing charity (check the register of charities at <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/>)
- Pronounceable – not too complicated.
- Suitable – look for something appropriate.
- Timeless – that won't date easily.
- Meaningful – to explain what you do or convey an image.

Getting Started

When you have established that there is a need for your group, and have decided on a name, start to get people involved, who share your aspirations. Spend some time clarifying your goals, and thinking about how they will be achieved, so everyone knows what they are working towards and work can be shared fairly.

An Action Plan

Put together a plan for the stages of the work, so that you can see what you need to achieve, when, and who is taking the lead for different actions. It can also make it easier to get support and funding if you have a plan and an agreed vision of what you want to do and how you want to do it.

Adopting a governing document

Once you are clear about your aims, the next step is to put some structures in place to help with the smooth running of the group. However small and informal you want the group to be, it is worth having some rules (contained in your governing document) so everyone involved is clear about what the group can and cannot do, and how it will do it. If you are planning to apply for grants to help achieve your group's aims, any grant-making body you apply to will want to see a copy of your governing document you use.

You will also need to establish roles for the people involved in the group, who may be officers on your board or committee.

A governing document is a legal document that sets out rules for, as it says on the tin, governing a group. The exact type of governing document you need will depend on the legal structure you choose for your group.

Your governing document contains all the information needed to run the organisation effectively, such as:

- what the group is set up to do (known as its 'objects')
- how the group will do those things (known as 'powers')
- who will run the organisation (the trustees, directors, the board or management committee)
- how it is to be run and administrative arrangements for meetings, voting, looking after money, delegation to sub-committees etc
- what happens if administrative provisions need to be changed
- what happens if the group wishes or needs to wind up.

Getting a Committee/Steering Group

A voluntary group cannot be a one-person show, however energetic or driven that person is. While you do need to make a personal commitment, you shouldn't be alone. You can start a group with three people, but up to five is a good number to start planning with. You will need a minimum of three people for your governing body, whether that is called management committee or something else, usually taking the roles of chair, treasurer and secretary. The governing body's key role is to manage the group's affairs, either between general meetings (where all members – if you have them are involved in decisions), or overall if you have a closed membership. If you are planning on becoming an incorporated organisation, in the early days, you will need a 'steering group', who will oversee the steps to incorporation.

Your governing document will cover how many people should be on the governing body, how they are chosen, and how long they will remain in position. When you first set up, you will need people to agree to sit on the management committee and sign the governing document and any incorporation paperwork.

The governing body is responsible for making sure that the group works within its governing document and within the law, and is responsible for handling the finances of the group. Holding your first meeting of all the members of your new group (even if your membership is usually where the governing document is ratified, and, if you are having an elected governing body, the time to elect it.

Opening a bank account

A bank account opened in the name of your group is another requirement if you intend to apply for a grant to finance the group's activities. To open an account your governing body will need to complete a form called a "form of mandate", available from the bank where you are opening the account. The form will tell the bank who is authorised to sign cheques/make BACS payments (the "signatories"), and may ask for detailed information about these people. Usually voluntary groups have a rule in their governing document that states that at least two signatories are required for cheques. It is good practice (and sometimes required by grant giving bodies) that the two signatories are not related, or in a relationship with each other.

Policies and Procedures

Depending on the activities of your group you may need certain policies and procedures in place; for example if you will be working with children and young people then you will need a Child Protection Policy.

Voluntary Impact Northamptonshire has a list of policy templates on the website which can be downloaded and adapted as required. We can also advise on which policies and procedures you may require.

Voluntary Impact Northamptonshire can provide limited advice on Governance as part of its core funding. However, more detailed support can be provided through our Executive Membership or our paid for Consultancy Service.

Simply contact info@voluntaryimpact.org.uk in the first instance.

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