

Setting Up Your Voluntary or Community Group

Why form a group?

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

- There may be a proposed development in your neighbourhood which many people feel strongly about
- 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 friendship, support and advice
- You may want to give an existing group a recognised structure in order to attract funding

How do I start?

Just as there are many different reasons to form a group, there are many different types of group you could set up. It is 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 will need to do is get as many people as possible together, so that they can all contribute their ideas and energy. 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 is 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:

- 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 street, 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.

Offer an incentive

Not many people enjoy meetings, and for some it is a big effort to arrange childcare or transport, so it is 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 creche or offer help with childcare costs? Might you need a sign language interpreter? For details of halls in Mid Sussex, please contact the Community Development Officer at Mid Sussex District Council on 01444 477495

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 is 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 is 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.

Involve everyone in the discussion

While it is 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.

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 is 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 is worth allowing this 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 is not always possible to agree a meeting date that everyone can make, but it is important to make sure you are not always excluding the same people just because you have not thought about their needs.

Agree the aims of the group

It is 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 is 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. 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.

Advice and model constitutions can be obtained from the Charity Commission (<http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/registration/mgds.asp>), tel: 0845 300 0218; or Mid Sussex (South) Council for Voluntary Service, tel: 01444 258102, or East Grinstead Council for Voluntary Service, tel: 01342 328080. Your local CVS can also help with information, items of equipment for loan or hire, photocopying service, funding searches, training events, room hire and more.

Open a bank account

Running any group costs money and you should 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 is 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.

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:

Recruiting Volunteers

Potential volunteers can be recruited by advertising in the local paper, the "village voice" magazine, posters in shop windows, community noticeboards, or contact The Volunteer Bureau, East Grinstead Office 01342 322306 or Burgess Hill Office 01444 870711.

Fundraising

Before you start trying to raise money for a project, an event or general running costs for your group, you need to break down the likely costs to form a budget. Using your budget, you can arrive at an overall fundraising target. Once you have an overall fundraising target, you need to think about how to raise the money. Consider:

- Selling badges, cards, t-shirts or other merchandise
- Collections, donations and raffles;
- Applying for grants or awards;
- Organising your own fundraising events;
- Writing to local businesses

You do not have to register a raffle or lottery if the raffle happens during the course of an event - e.g. the tickets are sold and the raffle drawn during a meeting, fête, dinner dance, party. This is called a 'small lottery'.

You are also not required to register if the sale of raffle tickets is restricted to members of your organisation, or the sale of tickets is restricted to people who all work on the same premises, or the sale of tickets is restricted to people who all live on the same premises. This is called a 'private lottery'.

In both cases the entire proceeds of the lottery must be used for the benefit of the organisation. If you want to run a raffle where tickets are sold in advance to members of the public, you must contact the Licensing Section of Mid Sussex

District Council who will advise you on the procedure involved. (Tel 01444 477344 Email: licensing@midsussex.gov.uk). Licences may also be required for bingo and other games of chance, entertainment events, street collections etc. Again, contact Mid Sussex District Council's Licensing Section for further information.

West Sussex County Council offers a free to use funding search service West Sussex 4 Funding to voluntary and community organisations to search for potential sources of funding (<http://www.open4community.info/westsussex/default.aspx?RENAV=Y>). Both CVS's (contact details as above) are able to help with searches for potential funding opportunities. Mid Sussex District Council supports projects run by fully constituted voluntary organisations under its Corporate Grants Scheme (<http://www.midsussex.gov.uk/page.cfm?pageid=1800>). Support is targeted towards groups that help the Council to meet its identified aims.

Finding a place to meet

For details of halls in Mid Sussex, please contact the Community Development Officer at Mid Sussex District Council on 01444 477495