Set up a community group

01. Background

In this factsheet you will find practical advice on how to set up and develop a new community group.

In the North East there are many people who want to come together for many various reasons. It maybe that they share the same interests or hobbies, or that they want to address a particular local issue or concern. There are many reasons why a group comes together, but whatever those reasons are, there is help available to make the processes as easy as possible.

Why form a community group?

Groups are a great way of meeting new people, learning new skills and for directly getting involved with the local community.

There are many reasons for a group to get together:

Enables people to share information and help each other to solve issues;

Stimulates debate and discussion in order to provoke community-led action;

Brings together a variety of people with different skills, ideas and resources to address particular issues; and

Can help a community to access funds to improve the local area.

Community groups are fundamental to creating sustainable communities. People coming together to form a group helps to improve a community and aides social inclusion, alleviates exclusion, and increases the amount of people directly involved in their community – all essential ingredients for any community striving to be sustainable.

02. Suggested Activities

Here are some simple steps that you can take to form a new community group.

Before you start

Step 1. Join an existing group

Before you set up a new group, it is worth checking to see if there are any existing groups in your area (or similar). You could research this on the internet, at your local library or local authority. The next step is to see if you can join this group. If there is not a suitable group in your area that you can join, the following suggestions will help you to set up and run your own group.

Step 2. Define your group

Defining the reason for your new group might be the starting point, as will defining what you want to achieve. Once you know what you are interested in, you can start to think about how to set it up and operate it.

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Setting up

Step 3. Speak to the experts

Your local development agency or the community development team in your local authority will be able to offer you advice and guidance on setting up your group.

Step 4. Arrange your first meeting

There are some key activities that need to be done before a group can hold its first meeting.

Think about the venue for your first meeting and what local community buildings are near by. Make sure the venue you choose for the meeting is easily accessible for all, and well served by public transport.

Choose a date and time that will be convenient for most people, and depending on the time, you might like to consider childcare provisions.

You will also need to book your venue in plenty of time and think about refreshments and catering facilities.

Step 5. Set an agenda

It is important to know in advance what the meeting is for and what you and attendees hope to achieve from it.

A basic agenda for any meeting should include the following:

Welcome.

Apologies from those who could not attend.

Minutes and outstanding actions from the last meeting (if appropriate).

Agenda Items.

Any other business.

Date and time of next meeting.

Step 6. Advertise the meeting

When you have finalised your ideas for your meeting, it is important to advertise it well in advance, and in a variety of locations. You might like to create a poster or a flyer and issue it at prominent locations across the local area.

You might like to send out a press release to the local papers too, this may drum up some further free publicity for you.

Further advice on promoting information can be found in the 'Communicate ideas and information' factsheet.

Step 7. Run your first meeting

You've advertised your event and now it is important to make the meeting as successful as possible.

Follow your agenda, but be flexible if you need to be. It is also worth asking someone to take notes and a person to chair the meeting in advance.

You may wish to consider agreeing an informal code of conduct for all meetings. This might include agreeing to listen to the person who is speaking, not interrupting anyone when they are speaking and ensuring anyone who wants to speak is able too. Remember to ask the attendees to create this at the start of the meeting and to abide by this for all future meetings.

Step 8. Set up a committee

It is not necessarily essential to arrange this at your first meeting, but it is important to have a committee set up to ensure the effective working of the group.

Essential components: The Committee

This is the team elected each year to manage the organisation on behalf of the members. There are usually two types of Committee member: officers and ordinary (or other) committee members. Officers have defined roles such as Chair,

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Vice Chair, Treasurer or Secretary. Ordinary committee members play a valuable supporting role. Acting as an ordinary committee member provides useful experience for taking on the role of an officer in the future. All committee members have equal voting rights, except for the Chair of a Committee meeting who has the casting vote.

The Chair
The Chair provides leadership for the Committee, and sets the agenda for meetings and manages meetings in line with the agenda.

The Secretary
The Secretary is a key committee member and ensures that the organisation runs smoothly. The Secretary provides a link between committee members and the organisation, and between the organisation and outside agencies.
The Secretary deals with all correspondence that the organisation receives and helps the Chair ensure that the Committee's meetings run smoothly.

The Treasurer
One of the key roles of the Committee is to manage and control the funds of the organisation. All Committee members have equal responsibility for the control and management of the funds. The Treasurer plays an important part in helping the Committee carry out these duties properly.
The Treasurer should record all income and expenditure in a ledger. The ledger can be a simple accounts book or a computerised system. The Treasurer should record details of the amounts received and spent, and have the details available for every Committee meeting. They also directly liaise with the bank relating to all financial issue that arise.

Step 9. Governing documents
In order to run as an effective group your organisation needs a governing document to set out the aims and objectives of the organisation. Such governing documents can vary due to the size and nature of an organisation.
Make sure you choose the right governing documents for your organisation. There are three main types:

1 Unincorporated means the group is not recognised as an entity in law, but has a constitution (a document that establishes the rules and principles that govern a group).

2 Incorporated means a not-for-profit company with limited liability which is recognised in law. Such a status has a memorandum (terms of an agreement) and articles (a particular section in a series of written documents) and requires registration with Companies House (the official United Kingdom Government register of UK companies).

3 Informal means a group who want to meet informally, but with some rules, or terms of how the group will cooperatively work together.
For further assistance with governing documents, groups should contact their local development agency.
Once you have run your first meeting and set up your governance you can now get on with the fun stuff – your group's planned activities. For some inspiration, have a look at the various factsheets in this toolkit.

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03. Additional Information

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There are additional things that your group might like to do once they set up:

Policies and procedures

Depending on your organisation and the activities that you undertake there could be many things that you will need policies and procedures for. A variety of policies you may need are available to view here www.volresource.org.uk/samples/checklst.htm at or alternatively contact your local development agency for advice.

Gain more members

Although members of the community will be involved in the Committee and at public meetings, other activities can be undertaken to ensure enthusiasm is maintained:

1 Remove potential barriers

Remove any potential barriers to involvement that currently exist. For example, are there transport problems? Or are there childcare facilities available? and so on. Try, where possible, to alleviate these issues or to provide services to ensure people are able and welcome at your meetings.

2 Publicise activities

It is necessary that the community is kept informed of all your activities throughout the life time of the group. Visit the factsheet 'Communicate ideas and information' for tips on how to do this effectively.

3 Carry out a skills assessment

As groups continue, they often identify skills that people within the group want to develop further. These skills will usually benefit both the group and the individuals within it. A variety of training is available to groups across the North East. For details contact your local development agency.

04. Funding Opportunities

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Funding for community projects is available in a variety of forms. Contact your local development agency's funding adviser, and visit the Directory for full contact details and up to date information on current funding opportunities.

05. Useful Contacts

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Your local development agency and local authority community development team will be able to help you. Full contact details can be found in the Directory.
Navca is a national membership organisation providing information on their website to support local and voluntary action. www.navca.org.uk

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06. Checklist

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To help you set up you community group the following key activities, where possible, should be undertaken:

1 Plan your first meeting.
2 Publicise your meetings effectively.
3 Set up the correct governance structure for your group.

07. About the Contributor

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The information in this factsheet has been written by County Durham's One Voice Network which supports voluntary and community groups across County Durham.