

Starting a Community Group

Background

Community organisations most usually start up in the following ways:

- Focusing on an issue that impacts on the local community e.g. action/pressure groups, which want to change something or stop something happening.
- Through individuals wanting to make contact with others with similar concerns and interests/social groups.
- Where an external agency has identified a need or issue that is not being addressed - these groups often develop with the support of community workers.

First Steps

- The best way to start a group is to make informal contact with others who feel the same way, and bring together a group who share your interests and concerns. At first just talk about what you could do. It may emerge that not all interested people want to get fully involved, but would be prepared to help on an occasional basis - bear in mind that people may already have many commitments.
- As a result of the initial discussions with others you should have some idea of what you hope to do and how you could go about doing it. Also you should have a clearer idea of what support, skills and expertise people are able to offer.
- A good start is to discuss what the issue is that you are trying to tackle. You will probably find that people see the issue in different ways and are bound to have different solutions and methods in mind, different skills to offer and varying amounts of time to give. It would be useful to get some commitment and agreement from people about ways forward at this stage.
- Consult as widely as possible - find out what other people think about your ideas. Talk to other groups who have already been through the start-up process. It's invaluable to share experiences and avoid the pitfalls that are inevitably looming up ahead! Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Find out about the range of agencies that are available to help you get your ideas off the ground. Find out more about the issues you want to tackle and get involved in local networks that may help you identify other interested individuals.
- Many community groups come together to focus on particular issues that could impact negatively on their communities. Many of these groups run very successfully for a set period of time then disband once they have achieved what they set out to. It is worth considering from the outset whether your group will have a limited shelf life or whether you can anticipate longer-term needs that will need to be met.

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- Do your research and establish that there is actually a need for your proposed ideas. Find out who else is involved in your area (this may be a geographical community or community of interest such as mental health users). There may be community development workers on the same patch, employed by other agencies, who would be able to provide a range of essential support.
- Check whether there are other organisations operating in the same local area or similar organisations meeting the needs of the same community of interest. It may be more appropriate for you to work with an existing group and share skills and resources rather than setting up independently and competing for resources such as funding and volunteers.
- Set yourselves realistic targets - there is no shame in starting small. It's much more motivating to feel that you are actually achieving something and be able to shout about it than feel that it's all an uphill struggle and you're getting nowhere. This also enables you fairly quickly to establish a track record and a reputation for getting things done - other people are far more likely to want to get involved on this basis.
- Where you are working on a project which is on a much larger scale (e.g. Setting up a community centre) break the overall task down into its smaller elements and stages. Set timescales for achieving the various stages and let others know when you have reached them.

What Next

You will get to a stage where you need to formalise your ideas further, in order to be able to put them into practice effectively. Next steps would include:

- Holding an open meeting to formally launch the new organisation.
- Preparing and formally adopting a constitution or set of rules.
- Setting up a bank account in the name of your group.
- Appointing a committee to organise the practical day-to-day running of your group.

*For further advice on **Starting a Community Group** contact:
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