

Starting a Community Group

1. Identifying Need and Starting a Steering Group

Community groups often start with a conversation about how to fix a problem or with an idea to create something new. However, before you start to set up your group you need to be clear what you want to do and if there is a need for it.

What do you want to do?

Although this may seem a simple question it is important you clearly define what it is you want to do. Ask yourself:

- What are the issues or problems you have identified?
- What is the effect of these on the community?
- What changes do you want to see?
- What do you want to do to bring about these changes?
- How will these will help solve the problems you have identified?
- Who are going to benefit from your activity or service?
- Where are you going provide these?
- What are short/long term priorities?

What is already being done?

Duplicating what other groups are doing or have done in the past can make it more difficult to access support and funding. You need to make sure there are no organisations carrying out similar activities in your area. Ask:

- What services/organisations already exist to meet the issues or problems?
- Who provides these?
- How frequent are they?
- Who is eligible to use these services?
- Has this type of group been attempted before and failed, if so why did it fail?

Use various sources of information to find out what already exists such as community directories, local newsletters, social media and simply asking people. You may find that there are groups already providing the activities/services you wish to and that joining these would be far more effective than setting up a new organisation.

Proving the need for your group

Once you have defined your idea it is important to find out if there is a need for it. Asking your community what they feel and want is an essential part of identifying need and getting community support for your new group.

There are a number of different ways you can engage with your community including:-

- Community meetings
- Surveys and questionnaires
- Focus groups

Whichever method you use it should:

- Be inclusive and carried out with the people who will benefit from your group
- Involve potential stakeholders and other community members who will support your ideas
- Be accessible so everyone has an opportunity to take part in it
- Have a clear purpose which will assess the expectations and requirements of beneficiaries, stakeholders and supporters
- Be relevant to the size and type of group you are looking to set up

For more information see the [Community Toolkit 4: Community Profiling and Engagement](#)

Setting up a Steering Group

Once you have identified there is a need for your group and have the support of the community, you will need to form a steering group who will:

- Set up the formal group
- Undertake a feasibility study
- Establish strategic plans
- Develop governing documents and policies
- Get funding

This group should ideally be made up of people who will use your group, experts in specialist areas (finance, publicity, funding etc.), agencies and members of the community. You will need a wide range of skills and experience to drive the group forward. The matrix below will help you assess if you have the right mix of skills and experience in your steering group.

Steering Group Skills Matrix

	Steering group have the skills	We need to find someone	We need to get external support
Leadership & planning to drive the group			
Experience and knowledge of issues the group is being set up to tackle			
Financial understanding to identify costs and establish financial processes			
Good verbal communications to speak at meetings and represent the new group			
Good writing skills for reports, funding applications and publicity			
Understanding of group legal structures and responsibilities of committees			
Research and analytical skills for carrying out/supporting a feasibility study			
Design skills for promotional material e.g. leaflets, posters, surveys			
Understanding of the wider community planning environment and local third sector			

Potential Problems for a Steering Group

Being part of a steering group is very rewarding, especially when you see the formal group established. There is however, a significant amount of work to be undertaken by the steering group who are volunteers and have other commitments in their lives. The steering group need to be realistic as to what they can do and the times scales they can do it in.

Key things to be mindful of:

- Not having enough people to support the work of the steering group
- Unrealistic goals due to enthusiasm for the project
- Getting bogged down in the planning process and loss of enthusiasm
- Volunteer fatigue and not clarifying roles/responsibilities
- Not carrying out regular evaluation of the group and checking if it is still feasible
- Not having a formal committee to take forward the operational running of the new group

Establishing a terms of reference that sets out how the steering group will run will help overcome some of these problems and act as a high-level plan of how the group will be governed.

Terms of Reference Example

Group Name:

Date established:

Objective of group:

- Write a brief overview of the aims of the group identifying key activities such as ‘Become a Charity’ remember this is for the steering group and not the actual group

Members of group:

- Detail here the members of the steering group and how new members can join

Governance of Group:

- Define here how the group will run, the roles and responsibilities of members and how the group will ensure compliance to legislation, such as data protection, for example note:
 - How frequent will meeting be held and where will they be?
 - Who will organise and chair the meetings?
 - How will topics for the agenda be agreed?
 - Who will provide secretarial duties for the group?
 - Who will be the group treasurer?
 - How will group members share information and resources?
 - How will data protection legislation be applied?
 - How will sub-groups be run, who is responsible for them, how will the report back to the group?
 - How often will the group review and evaluate their work/progress?

Sub groups

- Although steering group members will work on many aspects of setting up the new group, splitting activities into sub-groups will help to manage progress and ensure activities are shared equally across the group. Sub groups can include:
 - Feasibility and strategic planning group
 - Governance group (setting up the legal structure and governing documents)
 - Finance and funding group
 - Publicity group

For more information see [Community Toolkit](#)

- [2: Legal Structures and Organisation Types](#)
- [3: Governing Documents, Policies and Procedures](#)
- [5: Group Identity and Promotion](#)
- [6: Feasibility Studies](#)
- [7. Developing and Writing Plans](#)

Document produced March 2020