

Starting a Group

Setting up a voluntary, community or residents' group is a great way to meet new people, learn new skills and help people to get involved in your local community. The process of starting a group involves four basic stages, and getting these right from the start can help your group to run smoothly.

The first stage involves finding like minded individuals who want to become involved in a group; there might already be a number of you or you may want to share your ideas with other people to find out who would like to become involved. Stages two and three should be carried out at your first Annual General Meeting (AGM) or Inaugural General Meeting and stage four takes place following this meeting.

Stage 1

The first stage is finding other like minded people to set up a group. This can often seem like the most daunting and difficult stage to tackle, but don't panic. Many groups advertise an informal gathering where interested parties are able to gain a feel for what the group might like to do. The main aim at this stage is to gather as much interest in the possibilities of a group as possible and identify who might like to take an active role in the group.

Your group will generally find that there are many people in the local community who feel strongly about their street, area or neighbourhood. Part of the work of a residents' or community group is to listen to these views and opinions and help to make sure that they are used to inform the development of action plans for the area. This is also true of groups that are set up around a particular interest, health issue or sport.

Once you've met informally over a period of time, got to know each other properly and begun to refine your aims and objectives you should set a date for your Inaugural (or first Annual) General Meeting (AGM).

Stage 2

The second stage of formalising your group consists of **putting together a constitution**. A constitution is your 'set of rules' that sets out the purpose of your group and describes how it will be managed. This document includes the aims of the group and details about how meetings will be run and decisions will be made. A constitution does not need to be complicated but it is your governing document so should reflect how you want your group to be managed.

You don't have to start from scratch when putting together a constitution; templates and sample constitutions are available which you can amend to suit your needs. Once you have a constitution that your group is happy with, you will need to formally adopt it at the group's first AGM. To adopt the constitution, members of the group must agree it and at least two members of the new committee should sign and date it (a record of this must be kept – usually in the minutes of the meeting).

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Stage 3

The third stage involves **electing a committee**. The constitution you have agreed upon will provide details of the committee's responsibilities, how many members you have and how officers are elected. A committee must include a chairperson, treasurer and secretary, and should have at least two other members. These other committee members do not have to take on a specific role, however groups often choose to elect positions such as vice chairperson or vice treasurer.

Any group member can nominate another member for a position on the committee; however, it should be decided by vote who actually takes a position. It is possible for individuals to act as chairperson and secretary whilst organising the first AGM, but they must give up the position at the point where the committee are formally elected.

Stage 4

The fourth stage is to **set up a bank account**. There are a number of banks which operate accounts especially for charities and community groups (and will require a copy of your constitution to be able to do so).

Any account should be set up in the name of the group with at least two signatories (people who are authorised to sign cheques and operate the account). The signatories must not be related to each other or live at the same address. It is a good idea to have three people who are authorised signatories with authorisation required from any two out of the three for transactions. These authorised signatories must be properly elected members of the committee.

Once these four basic stages are complete, you will be a fully constituted group with a bank account. The next stage is the exciting and rewarding part of starting to work to achieve your group's aims.

There is lots of support available to help you to set up and manage your community group. In North Tyneside, VODA provides a wide range of resources and support services to local voluntary and community groups. More information can be found at www.voda.org.uk or by contacting development@voda.org.uk or telephoning 0191 643 2636. Many other areas have a local CVS (Council for Voluntary Service) or support organisations that can provide similar help.

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