



*Fact Sheet:*

## Building a Successful Community Group

People living in an area who are concerned about various local problems often decide to come together in a group to try and bring about improvements to their local area and to resolve problems that affect the community. A community-based group, involving local residents with formally constituted recognition is usually the best way to achieve positive change.

### How to Set Up a Community Group

The early stages of forming a group are the most important as good organisation at the beginning ensures the best chance of lasting success. Your fellow residents and neighbours will be much more likely to join and support a Group that appears to know exactly what it is doing and why.

#### *Determine the Need*

The individuals who have decided to get together should form themselves into a Steering Group to organise a public meeting that will give everyone an opportunity to be involved.

At this preliminary stage, a steering group needs to determine if there is a desire in the area to have a representative community group. The most effective way of achieving this is by undertaking a Community Needs Survey.

*For further information see Supporting Communities factsheet on “Conducting a Survey.”*

This affords all residents an opportunity to express their concerns and views about the area and can perhaps be the catalyst for becoming involved. The findings of the survey can be made the focus for the public meeting before a committee is elected, thus avoiding individuals who are intent on lobbying their own pet interests.

In tandem, the steering group should consider producing a draft constitution, this legal document outlines aims, objectives and functions of the group - it is also an essential pre-requisite to make applications for funding.

***NB: All constituted groups with charitable purposes must register with the Charity Commission NI***



## *Planning a Public Meeting*

When planning your public meeting, take into consideration the following:

- > **Venue** - Choose somewhere convenient/accessible and neutral where everyone will feel welcome and comfortable.
- > **Date** - Be careful that time and date does not clash with other regular events like bingo nights or public holidays.
- > **Publicity** - The meeting can be advertised with door-to-door leaflets, posters, social media, and/or press releases. Give notice well in advance, at least 2-3 weeks.
- > **Chairing the Meeting** - An independent Chair from outside the area is usually the best option for the Public Meeting, especially when nominations for Committee are being called. Supporting Communities can assist with this function if necessary. A competent Chairperson is the key to a successful and effective meeting.
- > **The Agenda** - An agenda is essential to ensure that the Public Meeting runs as smoothly as possible and issues get properly discussed in an orderly fashion. The Chair and other organisers should all be aware of the Agenda beforehand. Try to keep the meeting as simple as possible. You'll want to discuss enough to generate interest, but not so much that you get bogged down by trying to cover everything.

### *Sample Agenda:*

- Welcome and Introductions
- Why the meeting was called
- Guest Speaker (if applicable)
- Identification of main problems and possible solutions from the Community Survey
- Proposal that a Community Group be formed
- Adoption of Constitution
- Nomination/Election of Committee
- Date and Venue of first Committee meeting





*This last point is especially important, as you will not have the same opportunity again to have everyone together to make arrangements.*

- > **First Committee Meeting** - An ideal Committee will have at least 6 and no more than 15 members. The election of officers should be conducted at your first Committee meeting (check your Constitution).

Have an Agenda, elect your Officers to carry out the business of the group, set yourself a few objectives to get started on and decide who is to do what. You should consider undertaking a community survey, if one has not already been carried out. This will help you to prioritise the issues to address. Do not try to resolve all your problems at once - start on a few of the more achievable ones first.

## Developing Your Community Group

When a Community Group is first formed it is important to lay strong foundations to ensure its effectiveness and success. You'll need to develop and build on basic knowledge and skills in committee procedures.

### *The First Committee Meeting*

An agenda should be set for meetings. At your first meeting, this would normally include:

- > Committee Procedures
- > Election of Officers
- > Setting Objectives
- > Date of Next Meeting

*Supporting Communities' training course 'Effective Meetings' can help Community Groups understand the importance of meetings, how to plan and conduct a meeting, and to recognise the roles people play in a committee.*

## *Committee Procedure:*

We recommend that the following elements are explained and that the Committee as a whole understands their role.

### > **The Committee and the Constitution**

Look at the committee as a representative organisation and ensure that it regularly reports back to its constituency. You can do this by holding Annual General Meetings (in accordance with the constitution) and producing regular newsheets, etc.

You must also adhere to your constitution. Each committee member should be given a copy of and be made aware of the implication and requirements of the constitution, e.g. quorum at meetings, voting procedures and membership, etc.

Further to all members understanding the implications of the constitution, they must also consider the public benefit implications governed by the Charity Commission NI. See the Charity Commission website for further information.

### > **Role of Office Bearers**

At the first committee meeting, you should elect your office bearers (again check with constitution). As each role is up for nomination, it is important that the committee is made clear on what is expected from the chairperson, secretary, treasurer, etc. Ensure proper records are kept of the election process (see below). In the event that more than one person is up for nomination for a particular post, then a simple majority vote is required.

<i>Sample Record:</i>	Chairperson:	Nominee: Joe Bloggs
	Proposed by:	Name
	Seconded by:	Name

### > **Setting Objectives**

One of the first tasks of the committee should be to draw up a Plan of Action for the forthcoming year until the next AGM. If a survey has already been carried out, then the group should produce a list of priorities based on the findings and set realistic and achievable goals. On the other hand, if the group has not yet undertaken a survey, then doing so may be one of its priorities.



Once an Action Plan has been agreed, the committee should be encouraged to develop a mechanism of addressing the issues. At a first meeting this may simply be a case of making contact with the relevant Statutory/Voluntary Agency and reporting back to the next meeting. Further down the line the committee/subcommittees can arrange meetings, site visits etc. to assist in progressing the Action Plan.

Supporting Communities can assist and facilitate the development of Action Plans and Inter-agencies.

- > **Set the Date of Next Meeting - Don't Forget!**

## Committee Roles

### *The Treasurer*

The Treasurer of the Group will look after the group's money and may be responsible for applying for grants.

The Treasurer's most important job is to make sure that the Group is not spending money that it doesn't have. To do this the Treasurer should:

- > Open a Bank account for the Group. (Be aware of signatories required as per constitution.)
- > Pay ALL money coming into the Group into the Bank account.
- > Keep the records in one book or excel spreadsheet and keep all your paid bills together.

*Supporting Communities training course "Money Matters" will highlight the committee's responsibilities with regard to finances and the importance of effective record keeping.*

### *The Secretary*

The Secretary of the Group will be the Group's point of contact with its members and with the Community outside. Most of the work will involve sending/receiving emails, writing, receiving letters, records of meetings, and organising Committee meetings.



Generally a Secretary will undertake the following:

### **Before the Committee meeting**

- > Find a suitable venue for the meeting.
- > Meet the Chairperson and agree an Agenda.
- > Send out a notice to Committee members of where and when the meeting will take place along with the agreed Agenda (at least a week before the meeting).
- > Prepare all papers needed for the meeting. (These should include correspondence since the last meeting and minutes of decisions taken at the last meeting.)
- > Circulate minutes of the previous meeting as soon as possible after meeting.

### **During Committee meetings**

- > Take a note of everyone present at the meeting and anyone who could not be there, but sent an apology.
- > You should be able to answer questions about the previous minutes and change them if the Committee agrees.
- > Take notes of what people say when reporting back, what they have done and any decisions that are taken by the Committee. If a committee member agrees to follow up on an issue, remember to put his or her name in the action column. This serves as a useful reminder.
- > Report to the Committee any correspondence received, letters you have written, and any replies that you have received so that action can be taken.
- > Write up notes in minute form with an action column (example shown) and send out to all committee members

### **After Committee meeting**

- > Write up formal minutes from the notes taken during the meeting in time for issue to be addressed prior to the next committee meeting - at least 7 days before.  
(See sample layout for minutes below)



### Suggested Layout for Minutes

Minute of Meeting held on (date) at (Time) in (Venue)

PRESENT:            Name            Organisation (if required)

.....  
.....

APOLOGIES:        .....

.....

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MINUTE	ACTION
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1.0	MINUTES OF LAST MEETNIG ..... .....
2.0	MATTERS ARISING
2.1	..... .....
2.2	.....

### *The Chairperson*

The Chairperson of any Committee is responsible for the smooth running of Committee meetings allowing **all** Committee members to have their say and work towards the aims set by the Group. The Chairperson plays an important role in the work of a Group and a good Chairperson will undertake to:

#### **At a Committee meeting**

- > Conduct business in the order set in the Agenda.
- > Keep discussion focused on the item as set by the Agenda.
- > Make sure that a decision has been reached before going onto the next item on the Agenda.





- > Allow everyone to speak and be heard.
- > Make sure a record of all decisions is kept.

### **Between Committee meetings -**

- > Know of all work that the Group is doing (otherwise you will get lost in a Committee Meeting) so that he/she is well informed about all matters that may arise at Committee meetings.
- > Keep in touch with other Committee members about how their work is coming along (this means supporting people, not ordering them about).
- > Meet with the Secretary to arrange your Committee meetings, draw up the Agenda, and ensure minutes are properly drafted and issued prior to the next meeting.

## *Some Useful Tips for Chairing Meetings*

### **1. Unite the Group**

Involve everyone at meetings in making decisions. Arguments and talking over one another can kill a meeting.

- > Allow others to 'let off steam' to show their feelings about an issue.
- > Don't take sides - make sure that you listen to both sides of a dispute and do not get stuck in an argument.
- > Involve other members - Ask members who have not spoken what their opinion of a problem is. In that way, *everyone* can have their say.
- > Sticks to the facts - if you do get stuck in an argument, always come back to the facts of the case and start from there.

### **2. Focus the Group**

All members must keep their mind on the task at hand; it is the role of the Chair to ensure that everyone keeps to the point.

- > Stay alert - Watch how often members are reacting to what is being said. You can often prevent an argument by seeing someone's facial expression and by asking their opinion.
- > Keep to the point - Always remember what item you are at on the agenda and stick to it.
- > Check that you understand the points raised - Ensure you are clear what has been agreed, or what you are being asked to agree.
- > Repeat again what has been said - Check that everyone knows what has been discussed and more importantly agreed.

### 3. Mobilise the Group

Try to get all members to work towards answering problems. You can:

- > Protect the weak - Do not let one group member dominate. If you are looking for answers, those who are not so loud can have good ideas too.
- > Check around the group - People may not feel confident enough to make suggestions, asking them directly may give you the answer to the problem.
- > Record ideas - Write down suggestions so you can go through them one by one.
- > Build on ideas - A suggested solution may not be perfect, but changing it slightly may be your answer, do not knock ideas.

### 4. Seating Arrangements

Try to get members to sit so that everyone can see each other and be part of the group.

## Committee Procedures: The Basic Principles

If the basic rules for Committee procedures are followed then the Groups' work can be done efficiently and speedily.

### *Procedure*

- > The most effective and efficient Committees divide out work evenly among Committee members so that no one is ever over-stretched.
- > Committee meetings should always commence at the agreed time. Meetings cannot take place without the approved quorum of people as noted in your Constitution.
- > Agendas should be sent to all members prior to the meeting. Discussion must be kept to the subject. Each agenda item must be dealt with and a decision taken with a consensus of opinion before moving on.

A typical Agenda may include:



- a. **Apologies:** Committee members unable to attend inform the Secretary. This lets other Committee members know the person has not dropped out. Check Constitution for non-attendance
- b. **Previous Minutes:** Check that all Committee Members received the Minutes of the Last Meeting and that they are accurate; any amendments need to be recorded.
- c. **Matters Arising from minutes:** These are issues discussed at the previous meeting that should have been addressed. Such detail is treated separately from any new item of main business.
- d. **Correspondence:** The Secretary should read any correspondence of importance received since the last meeting, i.e. those that require decision-making. Any letters referring to a particular item on the agenda should be deferred until that time.
- e. **Treasurer's Report:** This will give an account of money spent and received, plus the present financial position. All items/bills outstanding should be noted to give a true balance. Income/Expenditure book should be presented and signed by Office Bearers at Community Group meetings.
- f. **Main Business:** The Secretary/Chairperson should be informed in advance of the meeting of items that need to be discussed.
- g. **AOB:** "Any other business" is used as mechanism to discuss minor issues. If an urgent matter arises then the Chairperson has to use his or her discretion to either make a decision or alternatively defer the item until the next Committee meeting.
- h. **Date of Next Meeting** - Don't forget to set this while you are all together!

*NB: Committee meetings should not last longer than 90 minutes!*

If Supporting Communities is involved with a Community Group, our role is to advise and support only. All Groups should refer to their individual Contracts.



## *Guidelines for Conduct*

You are the elected representatives of your area and as such your conduct should reflect this by setting a good example at all times.

Some basic guidelines include:

- > Try to facilitate open and easy communication both within and beyond the Group, e.g. properly maintained and recorded minutes and a regular Newsheet circulated throughout the constituency.
- > Recognise the importance of working to a common agenda rather than individual motives.
- > Give full commitment and support to all members.
- > Agree and follow a plan of action. Ensure that goals/targets set are achievable.
- > All remarks should be addressed through the Chair. Members should not engage in conversation with each other at all meetings.
- > Only one person speaks at a time. If more than one speaks up, the Chairperson decides who speaks first.
- > Do not allow one person to dominate the proceedings; everyone's thoughts and comments are important and valid.
- > Personal remarks and offensive language are out of order.
- > Always show a united front rather than let others see there may be discontent. This will do nothing but discredit the group and its hard work. Remember you have a collective identity as the Committee.
- > In fighting should be kept within the confines of the Community Group. Ensure that it is sorted out within the committee and not brushed under the carpet.



- > Sometimes Community groups can become disheartened and develop negative feelings. Try to combat this feeling!
  - Look at what you have achieved and be positive
  - Do not expect miracles to happen overnight
  - Many goals you will set will be a constant uphill battle. Remember, 'Rome wasn't built in a day!'
  - Remain optimistic
  - Adhere to the rules of confidentiality