

## SETTING UP A NEW GROUP

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### Is a new group needed?

It's a crowded market...

In Westminster, we have around **700 charities and community groups**, doing everything from promoting arts and culture, to running computer courses for older people.

#### ...is there a group already doing what you want to do?

With so many groups working in Westminster, there's a chance that an **existing group is already dealing with the issues** you are concerned about. So even if you have good reasons for wanting to set up a new group, it's worth checking to see if your new group will duplicate the work of an existing group.

To find out about existing groups and services, ask Voluntary Action Westminster to **check** for you. We have a list of all the main groups and services, and will be happy to do some research on your behalf.

#### What happens if there is already a group delivering a similar service to the one you want to provide?

Of course, you can still go ahead and set up a new group, even if there is an existing organisation providing a similar service in the area. However, there is a **risk** in doing this: you may find it more difficult to get funding for your group because funders are reluctant to give money to groups that duplicate existing services.

### Getting a group started

#### Why form a group?

There are many different reasons why you may want to set up a group - for example:

- There may be a proposed development in your neighbourhood which many people feel strongly about



- You may have had a good idea and need some more people to help make it happen
- You may want to meet up with other people who have had similar experiences to yours, so that you can offer each other friendship, support and advice
- You may want to give an existing group a recognised structure in order to attract funding

### **What's the first step?**

Just as there are many different reasons to form a group, there are many different types of group you could set up. It's worth thinking about what kind of group you imagine it will be, as this may affect the order you do things in. For example, if you are planning to set up a charitable trust to run arts projects in the community, you will want to give some thought to the aims and structure of the group before you invite others to join you, so that you can be clear about what you are asking them to do.

On the other hand, if you need to respond quickly to a proposal from the council that will affect your area, the first thing you'll need to do is get as many people as possible together, so that they can all contribute their ideas and energy.

Though you may do these things in a different order depending on the type of group you are setting up, most new groups will need to:

- Hold an initial meeting
- Agree the aims of the group
- Write a constitution
- Open a bank account
- Decide who will do what

Each of these things involves several decisions and activities - here are some ideas and tips to get you started.

### **Hold an initial meeting**

Here are a few ideas for making your first meeting attractive and interesting:

#### **Publicise it well**

The design of your publicity material is important. You need to think about who you are hoping to attract to the meeting, and make sure your poster or leaflet will catch their eye and give them a reason to come along to your meeting. Make sure the date, time and place of the meeting are clearly shown on the leaflet, and that it's very clear what the meeting is about.

If your meeting is going to be a large one, with as many people involved as possible, you will need to do as much publicity as you can. You could use:

- flyers through letterboxes
- posters in shop windows or on community noticeboards
- leaflets in places where the people you want to reach are likely to go



- a letter or advert in a community newsletter
- a piece in the local paper
- an announcement on the local radio

If your group is going to be quite small, for example a residents' association for a single block of flats or street, it is worth investing the time to call on people to invite them to the meeting personally. Even if they don't come, this will give you useful information about whether they think the group is a good idea and what they want it to do.

### **Offer an incentive**

Not many people enjoy meetings, and for some it is a big effort to arrange childcare or transport, so it's a good idea to offer an extra attraction. This could simply be free refreshments, or perhaps a video or speaker about something to do with the group's aims or activity.

### **Think about the venue and facilities**

Is it accessible to everyone? Are there steps or other barriers you should warn people about on the publicity leaflet? Will you need to put up signs to direct people as they arrive? Would it make things easier if you had a PA system or induction loop? Will you need to organise a crèche or offer help with childcare costs? Might you need a sign language interpreter? If you have a speaker, will they need a data projector?

### **Think about the agenda**

The amount of preparation you need to do before the meeting will depend on the type of group it is, but it's always good to have some idea of what needs to be covered in the meeting. A typical agenda for an initial meeting would include:

- Welcome and introductions
- Aims of the group
- Name of the group
- Plans and ideas (and who will carry them out)
- Who will do what (responsibilities in general)
- Finances
- Date and time of the next meeting

If you have called the meeting, people will be expecting you to act as chair. If it's going to be a large meeting and you are not confident in this role, it may be worth asking someone else to chair the meeting - perhaps a local councillor, teacher, religious leader or well-known community figure. But be careful that your choice of chair is not going to cause controversy in the meeting.

### **Involve everyone in the discussion**



While it's important to appear well-organised, you also want to let people know that their contribution is needed and valuable, so make sure you don't close off discussion too quickly. The people who have come along to the meeting are the future members of the group, and you need to make sure the atmosphere of this meeting is as welcoming and open as possible.

### **Take minutes**

The minutes of your meeting don't have to be very detailed, but they should include a clear note of any decisions made at the meeting, and in particular who has agreed to take on which jobs. It's not easy to chair a meeting and take minutes at the same time, so ask for a volunteer to take notes at the start of the meeting.

### **Gather names and addresses**

Make sure you take contact details from everyone who wants to be kept in touch with the group - prepare a sheet in advance which you can pass round the meeting or have on a table at the door.

### **Set a date for the next meeting**

It's worth allowing this some time in the meeting, so that you can discuss how often you want the group to meet, whether daytime or evening meetings are best suited to the members of your group, whether you need to offer childcare or transport to enable people to attend meetings, and so on. It's not always possible to agree a meeting date that everyone can make, but it's important to make sure you aren't always excluding the same people just because you haven't thought about their needs.

### **Agree the aims of the group**

It's a good idea to talk about the aims of the group at this first meeting, so that everyone is clear from the start about what the group is for. Make sure someone writes down what the meeting has agreed and check that everyone is happy with the wording.

### **Write a constitution**

You may want to include your aims in a written constitution, and it's worth inviting a few people to volunteer to work on this and bring a draft back to the group.

If you are going to apply for grant funding, you will probably need a written constitution, to show funders that you are an organised group. Unless you are going to be a registered charity or a limited company, there are no legal rules about what your constitution should say.

Once you have written and agreed the constitution, however, it becomes the 'governing document' of your group, and it should set out clearly how you intend to run your group. A good constitution can help to resolve disputes and enable new members to participate fully in the running of the group.

### **Open a bank account**

Running any group costs money, and it's a good idea to start thinking at the beginning about where to get it from and how to look after it. As soon as your group has some money, you will want to give one person responsibility for keeping track of it (the Treasurer).



Having a group bank account is the best way to make sure the group's money is kept safely. Most high street banks offer special accounts for community groups. You will need to have at least two members of the group willing to act as signatories. Funders usually require (and it's a sensible precaution in any case) that you have a bank account where each cheque has to be signed by two people.

[Download Banking for Charities, a guide from the British Bankers Association](#)

### **Decide who will do what**

You may want to elect a committee with named officers (Chair, Secretary etc.), or just share out the work that needs doing immediately. Either way, everyone needs to know who is doing what, and when they will report back to the whole group.

### **How formal?**

There is no right or wrong way to run a group - how formal your group will be depends on the wishes of the people involved and the aims and function of the group. Many groups change their structure as they develop, so there's no need to get bogged down in legal documents before you've even got off the ground.

On the other hand, it's worth giving the structure of your group some thought every now and then, to make sure you still have a set up that meets the needs of your group.



The information in this section is reproduced with permission from the Resource Centre website, which offers a wide range of information resources for voluntary and community organisations. [Visit the Resource Centre website](#)

## **What is a charity?**

The law defines what a charity is, not the Charity Commission.

There is a legal definition of what a charity is, and your organisation may be charitable in the eyes of the law, even if you don't think of yourselves as a charity.

Registering your organisation with the Charity Commission doesn't make your group a charity – in fact, in order to register, you already need to be a charity.

So what is it that makes your organisation charitable?

There are three things that the law looks for. First, your organisation needs to be for the public benefit. Second, your organisation's aims need to be charitable, according to the legal definition. Third, your work needs to be not-for-profit, with any profits being reinvested in the organisation's work, and not going to the people running the charity.



## **Charity registration**

Not every charity needs to register with the Charity Commission – and not all are allowed to register, even if they want to.

Many people who run a charity think that they have to register with the Charity Commission, or that they need to have a registered charity number in order to carry out charitable work, or to raise funds. But this isn't the case – in fact, over half of the UK's 500,000 charities are not registered with the Charity Commission.

So what decides whether a charity needs to register or not?

It's often to do with income. Larger charities, with an income of £5,000 or more are required by law to register (although there are no financial penalties if they don't). Smaller charities, with an income of less than £5,000, are not allowed to register, even if they want to.

## **The benefits of charity registration**

Registering with the Charity Commission makes fundraising easier – and can give the public greater confidence in your organisation.

Registering with the Charity Commission offers three main benefits:

1. Many grant funders only make grants for registered charities, so by registering you become eligible for a wider range of grant funding.
2. Registration shows the general public that your organisation is legitimate, and is being supervised by the Charity Commission.
3. As a registered charity, you can get tax relief and reduced business rates on your premises (if they are used solely, or mostly for charitable activities).

## **Registered charities have extra responsibilities**

Registered charities have to meet the Charity Commission's reporting requirements, in addition to their existing legal responsibilities.

All charities have certain legal responsibilities, whether or not they are registered with the Charity Commission. But by registering, your charity takes on an extra responsibility to send an annual report and financial information to the Charity Commission every year. The level of detail you are required to send depends of the size of your organisation – smaller organisations need to provide less detail than larger organisations.

## **How can smaller charities prove their charitable status?**

Smaller charities that cannot apply to become a registered charity can apply for charitable status from HMRC.

Although the Charity Commission doesn't register charities with an income of less than £5,000, smaller organisations can apply for tax relief and a charity number from HM Revenue and Customs. An HMRC charity number is accepted by banks and some funders as proof of charitable status.



## **How to apply for registered charity status**

Apply using the online form – but be prepared with all the right documents before you begin.

There is an online application process that you need to use to apply to register your organisation with the Charity Commission. From 2012 onwards, all applications need to be made online. You need to provide the following information with your application:

- your charity's name
- names and addresses of your trustees
- proof that your charity is only going to do charitable work
- proof that your charity will provide public benefit
- a pdf of a governing document
- a pdf bank statement to prove that your yearly income will be more than £5,000
- a pdf of a signed trustee declaration

For details and guidance on registering as a charity, [visit the Charity Commission website](#)

