



Thirty questions to ask when thinking about setting up a new community group

First Things First

1: Why do I want to start a new community group?

Community groups are an essential ingredient of sustainable communities. When people come together to form a group it can promote inclusion by alleviating exclusion. When people become directly involved in their community, they are able to meet new people and learn new skills. They can share information and help each other to solve issues. Coming together in this way can also help a community to access funds to improve the local area. Whatever your reasons, you do need to be clear about why you want to start a new group in such a way that you can explain it to others in a clear and concise way.

2: What do I need to do first?

The type of group you want to be may affect the order you do things in. For instance, to set up a small community arts project, you'll need 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 controversial proposal from the council that will affect your community, the first thing you'll need to do is to get as many people as possible together so that they can all contribute their ideas and their energy to tackling the issue. Getting bogged down in worrying about aims and legal structure would slow you down unnecessarily at this point.

3: Is there already an organisation doing something similar near me?

This is something you'll need to research. If a group already exists in the same area doing what you want to do then duplicating what they're doing may affect the level of support, funding or volunteers you will be able to access, so do ensure that what you want to do is new and/or unique in some way before you start – at least in your area. Try searching the internet. Visit the library or your local authority. If something already exists, you could join that group, find like-minded people and save yourself a lot of work.

4: Could I work in partnership with any other groups or organisations?

If there are groups already doing something related but not quite the same, perhaps you could make your idea an addition to their already successful organisation, or perhaps you could work together to develop something new. If you want to work in the same geographical area then you could perhaps share premises and work together for the benefit of both groups.

5: How do I know there is a need for what I want to do?

You may feel strongly about a local development or issue but do others feel the same? Perhaps you've had a good idea for your local community but how do you know others will want to get involved? Or maybe you'd like to meet up with others who've had similar experiences to your own for friendship and support but don't know anyone among your immediate circle who could help. Or perhaps you are part of an existing group that needs to find new members to survive. To find others who feel the same or have similar interests, you need to get the word out in a number of different ways to reach as many people as possible.

6: How can I get the word out?

You could create flyers and put them up where people meet – in your local library or shop, on your local community notice board, or in your local pub perhaps – or you could write a piece for your local parish mag asking for anyone with similar interests or issues to get in touch. You could start a Facebook group or even hold a public meeting open to anyone.

7: Where can I hold a public meeting?

Think about the amount of people you hope to attract and the venues that may be available. What about a local community centre or village hall? How many people will it accommodate? What will be the costs involved? Is it central? Is there transport? Is it appropriate for the type of group you want to start? **N.B.:** Only as a last resort should you ever consider inviting people who are as yet strangers to you into your own home.

8: How do I go about conducting a public meeting?

This can be nerve-racking if you are not used to speaking in public so it's important not to be too ambitious about what to cover in the meeting. Make sure you have an agenda and clear notes of what you want to say. Keep it simple; a public meeting is not the place to engage in complicated discussions about structure or day to day organisation. Instead, simply share basic information, encourage others to share their opinions and ideas and, most importantly, gain contact details of people who may wish to be involved in the future.

Getting Organised

9: What's in a name?

The name you choose is going to stick with your organisation for many years so you need to spend some time finding a descriptive name that is easy to remember, suits what you do and feels comfortable.

You could start by coming up with ideas around the following statements: "My group will.....", "My group helps....." or "Our members are....." Use descriptive words, make up an acronym or try combining two words into one. Don't be afraid to be creative. Pretend you're answering the phone and saying the name as an introduction. Does it roll off the tongue easily or do you feel silly saying it? Does it sound too stiff, or too jingly?

10: What do we want to achieve?

At this point, you should already have plenty of ideas on what changes you want to bring about and how such changes will benefit the community. This is your mission. Now it's time to form your ideas into the aims that will give your new group direction. As a group, you may find it useful to carry out one or both of the following analyses:

- A SWOT analysis – a detailed description of your organisation's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (If you are a completely new group, this could be all that is required)
- A PEST analysis – an analysis of the political, environmental, social and technical factors currently affecting the organisation (If you are review planning for an existing group, it can be very useful to carry this analysis out too)

It's important to keep your aims broad and general so that you don't limit your activities. Two or three general aims are plenty, and the more simply worded the better – this is no time for jargon and complication.

11: How can we narrow things down?

So you now have a set of aims that are broad and general and no doubt they feel a bit big and unwieldy at this point. Now it's time to define these aims into something more manageable by setting some initial parameters and identifying themes. For instance:

- Do you want to help people affected by a specific issue in a defined area?
- Are you going to work with the residents of a particular town or village?
- Or with a vulnerable minority group that has special needs over a much wider area?

All of these considerations will have implications for your resources that will need to be taken into account in your service and funding plans so it's a good idea to be realistic right from the start.

12: How can we decide our activities?

Objectives are organisational goals that help to convert your broad aims into something more specific by linking your activities to your overall mission and aims. Consider the themes you have identified and list activities that will have the greatest impact, make the best use of your resources and help to achieve your aims. These can become your objectives. Once your group is set up properly, you can review these objectives and set up some firm activity milestones – targets you want to achieve in a given timeframe.

13: Will we need to form a management committee?

Management Committee, Trustee Board, Executive Committee or Steering Group - whatever you want to call it, they are the people (elected by and from within your membership) who manage your group and who are legally and financially responsible for it. It is important to have a committee to ensure the smooth running of your group.

If your group becomes a member of Northumberland CVA, your committee members can join Northumberland Trustees' Network and have access to a huge online library of resources, including a Strategic Planning factsheet, workbook and template as well as templates for SWOT and PEST analyses that will help with the previous few points. Find out more about Northumberland CVA membership at: www.northumberlandcva.org.uk/about/membership and about the network at www.northumberlandtrustees.org.uk.

14: Who needs to be on the committee?

You will need at least three people on your committee to take on the specific roles of Chair, Treasurer and Secretary, which every organisation should have. These 'honorary' officers have additional duties to carry out on behalf of the committee, although they do not have any more power than any other committee members. Our factsheet: [Roles & Responsibilities](#) lists the key responsibilities of these roles. Find out who can and can't be a trustee in our factsheet: [Who Can Be a Trustee](#)

15: What does the rest of the committee do?

Everyone on the management committee is responsible for ensuring that everything your group does supports its mission and aims, that all money, property and resources are properly used, managed and accounted for and that your group follows the law. They are responsible too for managing any staff and volunteers. Our [Roles & Responsibilities](#) factsheet also lists the legal and managerial duties of all trustees.

16: What sort of legal structure is best for us?

There are a number of different types of legal structures available to community groups, although most begin with the simplest possible structure – an 'unincorporated association'.

Unincorporated groups are quick and cheap to set up – ideal for small groups with a membership, short-term goals, low incomes and that do not intend to employ staff or acquire property. However, an unincorporated association has no separate legal existence and remains essentially a collection of individuals, so any legal proceedings taken against the group would actually be taken against the individuals themselves. Therefore, if you are a committee member of an unincorporated association you are personally liable for your group's actions.

Other types of legal structure include Company Limited by Guarantee, Charitable Incorporated Organisation and Co-operative. If you need help understanding which structure would be best for your organisation, read our factsheets: [Legal Structures](#) and [Charitable Status](#) or call our VCS Support Services team on **01670 858688** or email enquire@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

17: Will we need a governing document?

Even small groups should have a governing document. A constitution is a type of governing document that sets out the rules of the organisation and details the group's aims, obligations and powers. It's a statement of what your group is going to do and how it is going to do it.

Being formally constituted is often one of the basic eligibility criteria of funding bodies. It shows that your organisation is sustainable and set up correctly so other organisations can have confidence in what you do. It makes your group accountable and ensures that members make decisions in a democratic way. The type of governing document you adopt will depend upon the legal structure your group takes, so you can only write your governing document once you have agreed the structure of your group. For advice on the best type of governing document for your group, call our VCS Support Services team on **01670 858688** or email enquire@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

Getting Started

18: When should we hold our first official meeting?

The committee becomes official at your group's Inaugural General Meeting. At this meeting the proposed committee members will adopt the constitution. The people who adopt the constitution become the first committee members. After that, for small community groups, the management committee is usually elected annually.

19: How can we get others to come?

As well as putting flyers and posters in public places or writing a piece for your parish newsletter and local newspaper, you could use some of the following methods: email supporters and ask them to forward the information; make an announcement on your local radio station and on social media; offer an incentive such as free refreshments or a speaker. Or perhaps, if your group is going to provide activities for children, ask the local school to put invitations into pupils' bags for parents to read.

20: Will I need an agenda?

Your committee meetings need to include certain points of business and it is useful to set a format for the meeting and have an agenda to ensure that each point is covered and to keep things on track.

21: Where can our group meet?

This may depend on the types of activities you're planning. If you need a physical base for your activities, then this could be the best place to hold committee meetings too, although a huge recreation hall may not be conducive to getting committee business done if your activities are sports related. You may be able to use a room at your local community centre, library or local pub. You do

need to make sure that your chosen venue is accessible so that your group is open to as wide a section of the community as possible.

22: Do we need an action plan?

Action plan, business plan; in the early days of your group it amounts to the same thing since your concentration is likely to be focused initially on getting through the first year rather on detailed planning for the long-term. An action plan is where you can look again at the basic objectives you have already formed and set milestones and targets to keep on track.

It's a good idea to make your targets SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. For instance, if you want to raise money to fund your activities, try changing 'Raise more money for our services' to something like 'Raise £10,000 to fund our full 2018-19 service through voluntary income by 31/03/2018'. This will give you something solid to aim for and you can then break your targets down into smaller milestones so you can measure your progress as you go along. Make sure you consider costings, cash flow and how much you'll need to spend to get the organisation up and running.

You don't need to be an expert to do this – anyone organising a family budget knows about cost and expenditure.

23: Do we need policies and procedures?

Policies and procedures set out how a community organisation should be run. One of the most important ways a management committee can oversee the delegation of its work is via written policies and procedures. Some are required by law. They can help to demonstrate a group's professionalism. They can ensure fairness and resolve disputes, and allow new people to know how things are done in the group.

For more information download our factsheet: [Policies and Procedures](#) or, to discuss which policies and procedures would be best for your own group, call us on **01670 858688** or email enquire@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

24: How will we generate funds?

How much money you need to raise will depend very much on what you want to do. Cash flow is a significant factor for your charity and having enough income over the first 12 months is vital.

Some smaller groups are happy to rely simply on asking their members to pay a small weekly or monthly fee. Some add to this income by taking part in organised sponsored events or asking local supermarkets to allow them to 'bag pack'. Others carry out street collections (which need the permission of the local licencing authority), organise pub quizzes or raffles or host their own sponsored events (Permission and licenses may be required). To fund more costly activities or to purchase necessary equipment, you may be able to apply for grant funding. But before you start applying for grants, you need to make sure that you have the basics in place; funders need to know that they can trust you with their money, and that your project or organisation is well managed and likely to succeed.

Download our factsheets: [Fit for Funding](#) , [Searching for Funding](#), or [Fundraising Strategy for Small Groups](#). For more tailored advice and support, call our VCS Support Services team on **01670 858688** or email enquire@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

25: Do we need a bank account?

Your community group will almost certainly need a bank account. Most high street banks offer accounts for not-for-profit organisations, which will allow your group to start depositing funds and authorise signatories that have access to them. Instead of going for a 'standard' account, look at the many ethical accounts available and try to find one that aligns with your group's constitution. The first step though is to decide who on your committee will be responsible for signing cheques and

make sure that this decision is recorded in the minutes at your meeting. It is common practice to authorise two committee members to authorise cheques and take money out of the account on behalf of the group.

The bank will want to see your Governing Document and the minutes of the meeting that authorised the signatories. They will also need to see at least two forms of identification for each of them. Opening a bank account can take up to four weeks so bear this in mind when making decisions.

26: Do we already have the skills we need?

Every community group needs a variety of skills to keep it moving ahead. In appointing your committee, people will no doubt have come forward who possess some or all of the skills needed for the specific roles of Chair, Treasurer and Secretary, but it is still a good idea to carry out a skills audit to capture the current skills of your board as well as to highlight possible gaps and points where professional guidance may be useful. You may find that a committee member has marketing or business development skills for instance, or someone may possess well-developed IT or customer care skills. Finding even one of these skills amongst your members could be an invaluable asset to your group.

27: Will we need any training?

Governance is about leadership and ensuring that an organisation is properly run. Good governance is the board's responsibility but most individuals who take on the task of setting up a new community group don't start out with a well-developed knowledge of governance issues. Instead, they start out with a burning desire to provide activities for local children or to oppose a local planning proposal, and the governance side of things is something they must learn along the way. To find out about governance training for your group, call our VCS Support Services team on **01670 858688** or email enquire@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

You may need to source other training too. For example, there may be training needs around safeguarding issues if your group is going to work with children or vulnerable adults (To find out about safeguarding training in Northumberland visit voices-northumberland.org.uk/safeguarding-training/). If you plan to serve food, you'll need to have up-to-date food safety certificates (There are a number of private sector providers for this, or you could see what's available through Northumberland College). Depending on your activities, it could be a good idea to get a good basic grounding in Health & Safety too – again, look at local providers for this.

28: How can we keep in touch with people?

For very small community groups, this shouldn't be too much of a problem but as a group grows, or if the group operates over a wide area it can be more difficult to maintain communication with members and other stakeholders.

And of course the methods you use need to be sympathetic of the needs of the individual members – for instance, many older members do not use email or social media. Some other dos and don'ts: do use plain English to get your message across clearly and do ask people how they prefer to be contacted; don't overwhelm people with too many communications and if you provide an e-bulletin, do make sure you also provide paper copies and post them out to those who prefer it.

N.B.: Under Data Protection legislation, it is vital that you ensure you only send communications that could in any way be construed as being marketing or promotional in nature to individuals who have given their active consent to receiving them. For more information about the requirements of Data Protection legislation, visit the Information Commissioner's Office website: <https://ico.org.uk/>

29: Should we use volunteers?

Essentially volunteers should add to the efficiency, diversity and quality of your organisation. They can be involved at all levels of your organisation, from making decisions at a management

committee level, to working in the community at grassroots level and thousands of community groups would be unable to survive without them.

However, volunteers expect to get something positive out of their experience of giving their time and skills for free and should never be used as general dogsbodies to carry out the tasks others don't like. Volunteers need to feel valued and your group needs to provide them with ongoing support and feedback. Involving volunteers then is never to be taken lightly.

Read our collection of factsheets on involving volunteers, all available at www.northumberlandcva.org.uk/resources. For more support on involving volunteers in your work, call our VCS Support Services team on **01670 858688** or email volunteering@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

30: How can we keep up to date with changes?

Northumberland CVA produces a regular fortnightly VCS Support Services e-bulletin full of information on news, views, events, training opportunities and funding opportunities. You can subscribe via the website: www.northumberlandcva.org.uk.

If your group is a member of Northumberland CVA, your trustees can also receive an additional Trustees' Network monthly e-bulletin with information on governance issues, legal updates, consultations and links to new resources. Find out about becoming a member of Northumberland CVA at: www.northumberlandcva.org.uk/about/membership and about Northumberland Trustees' Network at www.northumberlandtrustees.org.uk.

Northumberland VCS Assembly offers an inclusive, independent and influential voice for the VCS in the county. Members come together to define common concerns, to speak with one collective voice and to take a stand on important issues. There are four geographical networks across Northumberland that all meet regularly and offer the chance for voluntary and community organisations to get together, share ideas and good practice and raise concerns. Find out more about the Assembly at vcsassemblynorthumberland.co.uk/ or email assembly@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

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