



What makes a successful Community Group

This advice note is designed to help you set up and run an effective, proactive and community-oriented group. Although some groups function perfectly well without any formal structures, you should always remember that groups evolve, members come and go, and objectives and situations change. So it helps to start off with some kind of basic structure and statement of aims that the group can use as a point of reference for current and future activities. There is a wide range of information and reading material available to community groups, but this section should help new groups to 'get the plot' without reading the book!

What are community groups?

Community groups are usually run by volunteers, although some might employ staff. Within each geographical community, you may find one or two 'locality' groups, plus numerous 'interest' groups. 'Locality' groups operate within a defined geographical area, and represent the community as a whole (community council, association or enterprise). Some groups operate as branches of larger regional or national organisations (Crofters Union, British Legion), and many exist locally to fulfil a specific interest or activity (country dancing club, historic society, playgroup, PTA).

Each group has its own distinctive role, and most have a constitution (set of rules, Memorandum and Articles, etc). Generally, community groups have some form of membership and democratic system for the election of committee members or Directors.

Community groups also have a mandate to represent and further the interests of their membership. 'Locality' based community groups are often better placed to undertake a broader community role and to represent a higher proportion of residents within their locality.

What do we mean by 'Steering Group'?

The term 'steering group' describes a committee, Board, sub-committee or working group of any type of community based organisation (club, association, company, trust, society, etc). It can also be used to describe a new group without any formal structure which

gets together to address an issue, or range of issues within a community.

Each community group 'steers' - in other words it directs, governs and manages its own activities.

What do community groups do?

Community organisations manage a range of activities and projects on behalf of the community. With a well-organised community group at the helm, even large-scale projects, events and complex tasks can be tackled in a professional way. Many community-led initiatives have proved to be more sustainable and relevant to the community than those created by private organisations, particularly in more remote and fragile regions. Communities can be innovative, create employment both directly and indirectly, and can strengthen the community as a whole by creating or retaining services and fostering a sense of identity and belonging. In turn, this makes the community more vibrant, and attractive to other people.

Community groups undertake a range of activities: direct and manage their organisation; plan and manage specific projects, activities and events; establish aims and objectives; interact with the wider community; develop effective committee and group procedures, etc.

Community groups have a remit to fulfil a particular function within their community, for example: to represent their membership or community as a whole; to provide facilities and activities for the community or sections of the community; to preserve cultural traditions; to manage community buildings; etc.

Why do groups need structures?

If you have a complex range of tasks to undertake, breaking them down into manageable 'chunks' will enable you to delegate work accordingly. You can then create a structured approach that allows you to become much more efficient. The members, investors, funders, etc of your community group need to know that you have good management systems in place. Sadly, the need for structure often only becomes apparent when things go wrong. The best way to avoid conflict and deal with problems is to establish a clear framework for your group



from the outset. Your first task is to research and adopt an appropriate constitution and establish good committee practice.

Broadly speaking, the task (the work that needs to be done) will need tools (a structure). This can be divided into four main areas:

Task	Tools
Develop, manage and direct (steer) the organisation.	Constitution, rules, specification for office bearers, financial system, budgets, projections, controls, etc.
Plan specific activities, events, tasks and projects, set targets.	Business plans, marketing plans, project application forms, work plans, strategies, etc.
Manage and direct (steer) specific activities events, tasks and projects - achieving targets.	Progress reports, working briefs, mandates or rules for sub-groups (and committee).
Allocate work, and work effectively to set targets.	Working briefs for volunteers, committees or sub-groups - contracts for paid staff or external contractors. Assessment of workers and work in progress reports.

There is a strong tradition of community work and management, and a number of organisations exist to support them. The sector has developed a range of systems, procedures, techniques and formats which groups can adapt to suit their own purposes. In other words, if you need help, ask for it. Help is available from The Carmarthenshire Association of Voluntary Services (see contacts at the end of this section).

About constitutions

The constitution sets out the 'rules' or Memorandum and Articles for governing an organisation. It covers the procedures for the appointment of committee members,

sub-committees, auditors, and so on, as well as the conditions of membership, areas of work, aims and objectives, etc. Remember that any constitution can be changed - but do make sure you know what this involves. It is essential that this most fundamental structure is reviewed from time to time. Over the years, your community group may no longer be fulfilling its original aims and objectives and could be held to account for it!

About committees

Community organisations appoint individuals onto committees or Boards as Directors to direct and manage their organisation. The members accept that they must trust the committee to run the organisation and that not all the information the committee holds is necessarily available to the members.

The membership may not be interested in some of the more mundane, detailed and routine tasks of the committee. But they will be interested in the fundamentals: keeping to aims and objectives; fulfilling primary functions; annual accounts and reports, etc. A committee must always consult its membership when there is a fundamental issue to be addressed, or strategic decision to be made which will make a significant difference to the organisation and/or which will have an impact on the membership. Some committees have a mandate to develop new projects and activities, and some are expected to consult first with the membership.

Most committees involve their membership at an Annual General Meeting (AGM), but special or general meetings may be held at other times. A good committee is proactive about getting good membership participation at any membership meetings - it may even have a strategy for doing so! Most committees are disappointed when members don't turn up - although there are some who (wrongly) interpret this to mean that everyone is happy with things!

The constitution provides formal rules or Articles for committees, but many committees also find that they need a more detailed framework. For example, you may wish to agree principles for effective and co-operative working, or working briefs for office-bearers. Committees can consider having a set of secondary rules to provide



them with a more comprehensive and detailed structure for their work as a committee - it may not necessarily be a legal document, but it can help good committee work.

Committee members must also be aware of their responsibility to those who will, at some stage, inherit their post. With this in mind, you should devise a strategy for continuity. For example:

- keep good minutes and give them to new committee members;
- have a proper induction for every new appointee - make them welcome and tell them what is going on;
- develop a simple 'management handbook' and pass it on to new people.

New committee members should also make a point of being gracious about the work of their predecessors. To work effectively, a good committee must be stable, but at the same time it must also change and evolve. There must be a balance between experienced members (to ensure continuity) and new members (to help facilitate change and growth). Most constitutions set out the procedures for this.

A good committee should not be complacent about poor membership participation, or an unduly high or low committee turnover.

Sub-groups

Constituted groups should always keep to their 'rules' when forming steering groups, working groups or sub-committees. Most organisations appoint a committee to deal with the overall direction and management of their organisation. Larger organisations looking to expand or develop new projects and activities need to think about setting up sub-committees. The danger is that committees sometimes think they have to deal with all aspects of the organisation themselves.

The key to success is recognising when to set up a sub-group or sub-committee. If a particular project or activity begins to develop a 'life of its own', or in other words becomes a significant part of the organisation's activities, consider setting up a sub-group to manage and develop this aspect.

Do not allow this area of activity to overwhelm the fundamental aims and objectives of the organisation and do not direct all your efforts into managing it. You may run the risk of losing control of the organisation, losing your overall identity and focus, and even neglecting your duties as a committee member. This is a mistake easily and often made by community groups particularly when large funding packages are available for specific projects. (Remember, if your organisation does move away from its original aims and objectives - and this is sometimes justified - you will need to make a **constitutional amendment**).

If you are an existing organisation and have identified the need for sub-committees, do ensure that you prepare clear mandates for their work. Your constitution may stipulate that one or more committee members must also sit on any sub-committees (this is a good idea in any event - it reduces confusion about roles and responsibilities).

The sub-committee must be aware that the committee itself is ultimately responsible for the organisation, and that the committee must therefore agree with important developments and make the significant decisions relating to the sub-committee's work. A good sub-committee should provide the committee with clear, objective information. The decision-making body, the committee, must be briefed on all the issues and the range of possible solutions or courses of action.

Any committee, whether that of a large or small organisation, should always look for opportunities to involve new people. Forming sub-committees can be a good way of doing this. Be clear about the mandate or terms of reference for the work of the sub-committee, but ensure that the new group also has the flexibility to explore new ideas and work together effectively. A small group would be ill-advised to set up a finance sub-committee to handle a £200 budget - the treasurer should be able to cope with this. But if the group wishes to raise a significant amount of money, say for village hall refurbishment's, that could justify the formation of a fund-raising committee.

A sub-committee can become so enthusiastic about its



work that it can overtake the committee. Say the sub-committee had attracted large scale funding for a significant new project. The main committee exercised its powers and rejected the sub-committee's proposals. Not only would this be embarrassing for all concerned. The entire community would be affected and demoralised. If you are a member of a sub-committee make sure that there is a clear mandate for the work which you do, that the main committee makes any significant decisions, and that there are effective methods of communication between the two at all times.

New Groups

When people first get together to address a particular issue, they become a 'group'. These people may simply be a group of like-minded individuals who wish to develop their community in a general way, or start a particular project or activity. They may have had no instruction from anybody to do this or have no remit to fulfil any function in the community. Many new groups are uncomfortable about having no community remit and would like to be accountable to the community for their work.

As a first step, a new group should see if there is an existing organisation which can take them under its wing. Sometimes there is none - in this case, do not worry too much. Every new organisation is created by a new steering group. In the early stages, you will need to build up community involvement before democratic structures can be put in place. From time to time every community needs a group of people to get together and stick their necks out.

There are distinct advantages in working as a sub-group under the umbrella of a constituted local organisation provided that organisation is sympathetic to the work proposed, and has a clear mandate from the community to undertake such work. For example, a Country Dancing Club would be an inappropriate organisation to conduct a broad community consultation (though they should be consulted, or become part of a working group). The community council is often the most relevant and appropriate organisation to conduct community consultations, and they can also manage certain community projects such as newsletters, social events, etc.

The advantages of working under the umbrella of an existing group are that it can:

- provide credibility for your work or project.
- reduce bureaucracy and allow the group to focus on tasks.
- provide a channel for funding.
- involve more people.

The disadvantage is:

- it might take control.

Whether you are a new group (or an existing group wishing to explore new opportunities), be sensitive to the role of other organisations in the community. Do not exploit or use other groups, their work or their ideas in a negative way.

If no suitable organisations exist to undertake a new task or project, and the community supports your proposals, your group will need to form its own structure. If there is a suitable umbrella organisation, your group may become a sub-committee answerable to the committee. In either case, there are many aspects of group work that need to be considered.

In its early stages, a group looking at new developments is quite fluid. People wish to explore their relationships with each other, articulate ideas and concerns and brainstorm. Once the group and its work become more cohesive and focused, the need to adopt a framework becomes apparent. Most people lose interest if they see the group as just a 'talk shop' and some people are uncomfortable with too many 'wild ideas'. (At the other end of the scale, there are well-established groups that have forgotten what an 'idea' is!) There must be a balance between talk and action - do people have the skills and commitment to make that leap?

Getting People involved

Make sure your group is structured in such a way as to encourage new people to join. Make real efforts to include a wide range of community interests. Many groups tend to look no further than their own circle of like-minded acquaintances. Consider making a rule, or an amendment to an existing rule, to the effect that no committee member may hold a post for longer than a set



number of years. Far too many groups become little cliques and some committee members have held their post for decades! Far too many groups with a broad community remit never need to hold an election for committee members. This is a sad reflection of the community - every community group must have a strategy for activating and involving its community. One thing to consider is to inject more 'fun' into your organisation - being on a committee needn't be boring! Your group doesn't have to be serious all the time! Organisations, like individuals, need relaxation time. Remember, the community group is the entity, not any one individual. Draw up a strategy to involve the wider community, be innovative or experimental, and make sure your strategy is implemented.

Let other people 'inherit' roles when the time is right, and be gracious and helpful about it. Take pleasure in the group as an entity - its ability to draw in and mobilise others, and your own role as an individual group member in achieving all of this!

The myth of 'credentialism' or sometimes the expert is you!

One of the drawbacks to community development is the myth of 'credentialism' - believing that only experts in specialist fields can accomplish a given task. Community groups can demonstrate that ordinary people can achieve great things when they work together.

For example, a community-run heritage centre could employ a team of experts to plan, develop and manage their new centre. But they could be dissatisfied with the work and the experts might not meet the community's expectations within the budget. In particular, the outside experts might not capture the essence of the community and its history. Local people could get together and pool their resources. They could become photographers, interpreters of their community and its history, curators and guides. They could dig out artefacts, recreate the past and bring the centre to life.

Always remember, even when you think your community cannot fulfil a particular task, you might be able to train - or simply motivate - a group to do it. The Carmarthenshire Association of Volunteers has

information sheets on motivating and training volunteers (see contacts at the end of this section).

Group Work

Most groups develop a dominant communication pattern. If you recognise this, take steps to address the problem.

The focal point of an effective group will be the chairperson. He or she should make it their priority to get the group members to work as a team and remind them of their reasons for being there. Every group needs to assess its skills, strengths and weaknesses so that it can manage its workload, maintain good relationships, deal with new opportunities and threats, etc. This must be reviewed on a regular basis - volunteers have other commitments - they may not always be able to demonstrate a constant commitment to the group or specific tasks.

How many groups view it as a 'responsibility' to work together harmoniously and with good manners? How many times have you been part of a group where no one would listen to you? How many times has an individual with a conflicting point of view been 'shouted down'? How many times has a project been pushed through without discussion because the most vociferous members supported it?

Even if you have good committee members and office bearers who can bring out the best in your group, do consider setting a framework for good group work. You might even get time off for good behaviour!

Building capacity

Consider building the skills and capacity of your group through training. Why not take the opportunity to build skills in the wider community too? This could be done by asking skilled people in your community to share their expertise with others. You could even undertake a skills survey of your community. People with marketable skills are too busy to accept a group role, but they may be pleased to spare some time to teach others. Outside agencies and bodies, like CAVS and Carmarthenshire County Council also possess resources and budgets to help communities acquire new skills.



Always be on the look-out for training opportunities - it is a good way to involve people and to strengthen the community as a whole.

Try to develop a sustainable ethos by recruiting members with a large range of ages and skills to ensure the mantle of the groups work continues. This also ties into gaining voluntary skills to address economic inactivity.

Setting Targets and Monitoring Performance

Assuming that you have the right structures, and have established the roles and responsibilities of your group and its office bearers, you will be able to cope with the planning and management of projects and activities, and the allocation of tasks.

Set targets to enable you to monitor your performance. Some of these targets will be part of a contractual undertaking with a funding body, some will be set by the group or community itself, or both. Some targets will be linked to finances, some to performance.

Compare actual performance and achievement against your original target plans at every group meeting. If you don't get round to it, you may need a sub-committee! Work with your community to establish priorities and set targets. Work as a committee to set targets for membership growth and/or participation.

Where there are contractual obligations to external organisations, the targets should be well-defined and agreed by all parties. Bring in professional advisers if necessary. Set timescales for doing the work; budgets and work plans must be prepared in advance. Make sure that all plans are realistic and allowances have been made for the use of volunteers - remember, volunteers work in a different way than paid staff.

Even if you are not required to produce work-in-progress, or monitoring reports, offer to do so. Let the community, membership or funding agency know how you are progressing towards your targets. Flag up any significant shortfalls and problems and if necessary ask for approval to revise your plans and budgets.

Make sure that plans which are drawn up are used as a

tool, and that the group understand what they have committed themselves to. For example, if you have prepared a ten year business plan, it should be in use for ten years!

Once you have a structure to monitor your performance, you can identify and address significant shortfalls and exploit new opportunities. No group can 'steer' without good information.

And Finally...

Before entering into contracts with outside bodies, or undertaking significant projects, successful community groups will have spent time on: identifying appropriate structures for their organisation (including membership criteria, aims and objectives, etc.); establishing working principles for their committees and sub-committees and the roles and responsibilities of committee members and office bearers; and prepare a strategy for overall development.

A group which is clear about its overall role and responsibility to its stakeholders, whether they be the community or external agencies, or both, should devise appropriate systems to ensure that projects and activities are managed effectively. Performance must be measured and monitored against targets which are agreed with the stakeholders. This should include the group's ability to interact and involve the community as well as their ability to work collectively as a project manager.

Whilst groups may be a catalyst for innovation and action in the community, they must realise that:

- they don't have to do it all (and it would be wrong if they did).
- they are only the lever - they are using their energy to generate more energy in the community.

The key to success is to devise effective structures and mechanisms for working as a group appropriate to each function, task, role, activity and project.

- Apply adequate resources to each structure and monitor your performance.
- Do not become too bureaucratic or system led.
- Your structures must be workable and understandable.
- Review and amend them on a regular basis.

Good luck!



Which community group would you rather be a member of?

A report from Hearsay Community Association

Hearsay Community Association is 15 years old. Our core committee has remained static since we first got together to form the Association. A few new people have come onto the committee, but they didn't stay for long. They wanted to change things - change some of the things we set up. The fact that they left just shows that they knew they were in the wrong, but didn't want to admit it.

We were going to start up a new project because there was money for it from the Local Enterprise Company. We spent six months working on it, that is to say, two whole committee meetings. At our last meeting, the treasurer told us that there had been no bank statements for one year because the bank was sending them to our last treasurer, Archie (he moved a year ago). Along with the last statement was a letter from the bank manager asking us how we were going to pay back the overdraft and the loan. Well, we were quiet shocked - we didn't know we had any. The treasurer is going to go round to Archie's old house in a couple of weeks to see if there are any other papers there. We'll make sure they are all sent off to the Accountants in Ammanford.

Anyway, we applied to the Local Enterprise Company for a grant. They turned us down. They said that they felt that we were not coping with the work we've got, and we couldn't demonstrate a demand for the project in our community. Well, we were flabbergasted. We know what this community needs, and if there are grants for a tourist centre - then that is what we need. Besides, the tourist centre we already have is at least two miles away and run by The Hearsay Historic Society. We could have one just as good.

Anyway, don't worry about the money situation. We think it will be all right because we're fairly sure that members won't have to pay it all back.

The Hearsay Youth Association approached us to see if we would let them use the hall for badminton. We told them that the hall is there for the community, and that

we would be grateful if they could refrain from hanging about around the phone box in the evenings.

The Hearsay Community Association Committee

A report from the Sirgar Community Association

We are delighted to report that membership has grown over the last year; from 50 to 100. This means that 55% of the community are now members of our Community Company.

Over the last year, we have held six open meetings to coincide with our Board meetings. These open meetings have been held to give people an opportunity to look at the community plan and to give people an opportunity to talk with us, the committee members. Following the open meetings, we continue with our committee meetings - of course, issues which have arisen during the open meeting are discussed.

The Community Plan.

Although everyone has had a chance to contribute to this, we wanted to ensure that there was a second opportunity to comment before the final plan was produced. The plan has now been sent to several agencies including the Council and the Local Enterprise Company along with applications for funding for one of two projects identified as being of most importance to the community. The second project, the youth project, is of a much bigger scale, and we would like to do some more work within the community before making an application. However, we have attracted some funding to bring in a youth worker for a period of 20 days, and money to conduct a feasibility study.

Firstly, there is an urgent need to carry out environmental improvements in and around the harbour. Secondly, there is a strong demand for more facilities for young people. They would like a youth centre - their parents and the wider community are also keen. We have 30 young people between the ages of 12 and 16 - there will be 40 in two years time, and we have projected that numbers will rise to 75 by the year 2015! There is no doubt that this demonstrates the need for a centre for our young people. We are looking to set up four new groups to manage our new projects. For the environmental improvements project, we will need a group of people to manage the



project, and a group of people to help gather rubbish off the beach. The management group will report to the committee and we are looking for people who are keen to learn new skills in management, finance and project development. This group will be expected to co-ordinate, and provide support to the beach working party to ensure that the task is completed within agreed timescales. Our funders have asked us to ensure that the work is done within six months and we cannot claim the grant money until it has been completed. All volunteers will be guests of honour at a very special beach party in July for the community!

The second group of volunteers is required initially to form a Parents Committee, a Youth Committee (under 16's only), and a project planning group. Representatives from the Parent and Youth committees will be represented on the planning group. Again, there are new skills to be learnt. We may hold a design competition to get exciting, new ideas from the community. Although the grant giving bodies are keen to support this project, we would like to conduct some more research before we decide what kind of building would be most suitable. Please speak to one of us if you are interested - if not, we will be speaking to you!

Accounts have been prepared to the end of March, and we would congratulate our treasurer for the hard work involved in producing them so quickly. We are pleased to advise you that our youth centre fund now stands at £2000, and we have a small profit of £200 for the quarter. Don't miss our annual general meeting on Tuesday, 15th April - 7 o'clock in the village hall. There will also be elections for three new committee members (the third of us who have been on the committee longest stand down every year) Nomination forms are attached to this report.

With best wishes to all our members,
The Sirgar Community Association

Contacts

There is a collection of detailed factsheets on the **Carmarthenshire Association of Volunteers (CAVS)** website:

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Disclaimer

This Advice Note has been produced on behalf of the Carmarthenshire Community Toolkit to assist community groups to make funding applications. However, it should not be taken as a definitive guide covering all areas of concern and it is recommended that further advice is sought in appropriate circumstances.