

**The work that community groups do is invaluable.**

Providing local answers to local issues, they make a huge difference to places, people and the environment.

Drawing on the experiences of community groups in Cornwall, we look at the ingredients of running successful community groups.

This publication was produced by Volunteer Cornwall and the University of Exeter.



# Making Community Groups Work: a guide to success

Rebecca Harrison - Michael Leyshon - Catherine Leyshon





We would like to thank the community groups in Cornwall who helped us produce this guide by sharing their time, knowledge and experience.

If you would like to find out how Volunteer Cornwall can support your group through guidance and support on volunteering please get in touch on 01872 265305 or [enquiries@volunteercornwall.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@volunteercornwall.org.uk)

This guide has been produced with the help of environmental community groups in Cornwall

## Contents Page



### Page Number

- 1 Planning for Success
- 2 Savvy Skills
- 3 Knowledge Matters
- 4 Time
- 5 Meetings
- 6 Facilitation Fundamentals
- 7 Enthusiasm, Conflict and Values
- 8 Publicity and Profile
- 9 Top Tips for Publicity
- 10 Roles and Responsibilities
- 11 Engaging Volunteers
- 13 Network, Network, Network!
- 14 Keeping it Comfortable
- 15 Growing a Happy Group
- 16 Further Resources

The work that community groups do is invaluable. Bringing together people from across the community, they provide local answers to local issues. But they do much more. They build a sense of community, skills, confidence and peoples' ability to participate.

Through sharing our experiences with other groups – what worked and what didn't – we can grow and become better equipped to tackle the challenges that lie ahead.

Drawing on the experiences of community groups throughout Cornwall, this guide looks at key things that can make or break the success of projects.





## Planning for Success

Planning provides the foundation for making your project the best that it can be. Project plans, budgets and time lines are a great part of good planning. However, there is much more that needs to be considered when starting a new project or pursuit.

It's often the simple things that are the most important – and overlooked – time, knowledge and skills. The success of everything a group does will in some way hinge on having enough of these.

Yet the pressures of getting enough funds or purchasing materials can often take over. This can mean groups take on more than they can happily cope with, as workloads and responsibilities pile up.



Working out what non-tangible resources you need for a project helps design manageable plans. This helps to avoid burn-out and to maximize group's successes, as work is done with energy and focus.

When it comes to planning, involving people who have an insight into the type of work you are doing can help your projects run smoother. By drawing on people's experience and knowledge you are better able to make accurate predictions, which will assist in the identification of potential risks, challenges and opportunities.

There are many people and organisations that can help you do this. Consider local voluntary agencies, your group's contacts, family, neighbours and friends – all these people may have experience and be able to assist – you just need to ask.



## Savvy Skills

**Identifying the skills needed for a project helps to find the right person for the job at the right time. This allows others to focus on their interests and maintain high levels of enthusiasm.**

The skills involved in running a community group and delivering a project are vast. From fundraising to photography – it is surprising how many talents are needed to get started and grow.

When you are just a few people it can easily start to feel overwhelming. Identifying the skills you'll need to run your project and events can help you avoid this. By getting enough assistance with the right things, at the right time, you can avoid the burn-out that comes from doing too many things at once.

By breaking down your project into the different tasks required and skills needed, you can identify where there are skill gaps and new volunteers are required.

There are lots of people out there who have the right skills and want to help. You just need to ask in the right places, and have a clear idea of what you are looking for.

Regular updates, which include any successes, your future plans and areas you need help with will get the message out there. Local newspapers, especially parish magazines, are particularly effective in rural areas.

If your project is designed to improve a community or area, then local people will benefit from being involved. Their health and personal wellbeing can be enhanced through taking part... So be confident when asking for support!



### Targeted Adverts for Volunteers

If you want to attract people with certain skills, interests or backgrounds consider what motivates them.

Could it be to share skills with a younger generation; help a cause they believe in; use their skills for social good or develop their skills?

You can find volunteers with special abilities, by advertising your opportunity on the website: [www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk)



## Knowledge Matters

Knowledge and best practice never stay the same.

Groups that keep their knowledge up to date and expand what they know have the best chance of making the most of their project and avoiding pitfalls. Staying on top of policy developments, funding opportunities and local news will help you in this.

Community groups with similar purposes are particularly supportive of sharing information and mutual assistance. Information on events, opportunities and developments in the sector are just a few of the things groups can help you keep up to date with.

Making contacts in the voluntary sector is extremely useful too, as many work in areas that overlap with your own.

Getting onto the right mailing list is an easy short-cut to all sorts of useful information. Voluntary bodies and the local council often issue particularly comprehensive funding and strategic development updates.

Knowing about your local community matters too! Every place is different. From the people and services, through to the issues that matter, no two communities are the same. Getting to know your local community and what makes it tick will help you make better informed decisions.

Knowing who's who, what's done and what's not, gives you the information needed to target your work, avoid obstacles, or prepare for battle!



## Useful Tips

It's a simple thing, but good icebreakers can really help people settle into a group and become part of the team.

A group that is inclusive of diversity opens themselves up to all sorts of new and useful information, perspectives skills and resources.

A friendly face, who is a good facilitator can be invaluable when it comes to helping people participate, contribute and get the most from being involved.

It's surprising what ideas, knowledge and experience can come out when people feel accepted and at ease!



## Time...

**Lost time is never found again, Benjamin Franklin**



Being a volunteer can have many pressures, as people juggle volunteering with work, family and other commitments.

The poor use of volunteers time risks losing focus and enthusiasm, and loosing out on what volunteers have to offer. Effectively planning how time will be used is a sign of a great group.

Estimating how long a task should take will help you work out if it's realistic and achievable. Doing so in the early stages will allow you to prioritise what's most important and act on this.

This planning will give you the chance to spot where work may be too much for one person, and find more help if needed.

Throughout a project it's important that people are realistic and open about how much time they can invest and when. This may be difficult as peoples' enthusiasm to help means they take on more than they can manage.

Encouraging people from the beginning to take on only what they can truly manage helps to build an accepting culture, where people feel comfortable being honest about their opinions and intentions.

Having someone to coordinate volunteers can make a big difference for many groups. An appointed person isn't always needed for this, as long as everybody knows what they're supposed to be doing and when and are happy with this approach!

If you're finding you have more work than you can manage it may be time to share the load through delegating some of it.

Prioritising your work will help you find time you didn't know you had. The important-urgent grid, which you can find online, will assist with this, as it weeds out time-wasting tasks from the essential ones.

Although planning time is important, many volunteers value the opportunity to have some control over what they do. Giving people a say in what they work on and how they do it are great ways to keep motivation high.

## Planning for Volunteers

Planning volunteers' work, so that they feel useful and get the most out of every experience is key to keeping volunteers coming back.

Groups that are well organised, have a clear idea of what they want to do and use volunteers time well are highly valued as those involved feel they are part of something worthwhile.



## Meetings

Meetings are a necessary part of group work, as they provide a perfect space for group based decision-making and sharing of information.

Unfortunately, conflict, confusion, agendas that over-run, getting sidetracked from or failing to achieve the purpose of the meeting are all too common experiences. This can drain peoples' enthusiasm, limit new ideas and put people off attending again.

As community groups rely on volunteers – and their drive to get involved – making meetings more effective and enjoyable should be a top priority.

There are a few simple things you can do get the best out of every meeting...and even make them a pleasure!

Agendas are the center of all good meetings and planning these well is crucial to meeting success. Great agendas are focused, cover what is required and are realistic in the time given to each item.

Clear minutes that are timely and document actions ensure that the progress made in meetings is not lost. They are also useful for new members and the wider public to catch up on your progress and achievements.

Every event and meeting that you have is an opportunity to find new supporters – be they organisations, local residents or MP's. By making it a habit to collect peoples details for inclusion on a mailing list or future notifications you can expand your network of supporters and your ability to work effectively.

### Getting to Know You

Feeling comfortable and confident with people helps information and ideas flow in meetings. It can also reduce conflict, as people are less willing to aggravate those they like!

Never underestimate the power of the cafe (or pub) to improve peoples' ability to work together. Getting to know people outside of meetings builds personal connections and makes open, honest discussions in meetings much easier.

## Facilitation Fundamentals

Strong chairs and facilitators are worth their weight in gold to keep meetings on track and make sure they serve their purpose. By following a few simple tips everyone can get more from meetings...

Determine what the meeting aims to achieve – is it to reach a decision, provide updates or create strategy? Remind people of the purpose at the beginning of the meeting. This will focus thinking. You can also refer back to the meeting's purpose when conversations start to wander.

Have a set agenda that documents the time allotted to each section. The facilitator or Chair should help everyone stick to this through good time keeping and assertiveness to keep discussions on track.

Make sure that you achieve the aim of an agenda item and allocate actions before passing onto the next one.

Keep people on track. Be confident to bring peoples' attention back to the item in question. Irrelevant conversation can be a distraction, frustrating and can eat up the short time you have together.

As Chair or facilitator you should challenge aggressive behavior and enable those who are shy or quiet to speak. Great ideas can come forward, if everyone feels willing and able to participate.

Regularly summarise discussions and repeat decisions back to the group, to ensure everyone has the same understanding.



### The Time, The Place...

Getting the right people in the right meeting first time around cuts down on the number of follow up meetings needed.

For example, if you want to reach a decision then it's valuable to include the people who have the ability to approve decisions.

### Asking the Right Questions...

- Who do you want to attend?
- How important is it that they come?
- Do they have any foreseeable commitments?
- What times can you expect them to be available?
- Which places would they feel comfortable meeting in?
- Do they have any special needs?



## Enthusiasm, Conflict and Resolution

Enthusiasm underpins great volunteering. It motivates action, inspires people to do their best and overcome challenges.

There are many things that can cause enthusiasm to wane including: feeling that your work isn't worthwhile or valued, boredom, breakdown in relationships and feeling like you are not a part of the team.

Following a few simple steps can help keep up volunteers' enthusiasm. These are:

- Provide positive feedback on volunteers performance
- Provide recognition for good work
- Invest in volunteer training
- Clearly communicate about a project and how they fit into it, so they can develop a sense of belonging
- Have fun!

Sometimes problems can arise within a group, as conflict and tension disrupts work and volunteer relationships. This can be due to many different things including: difficult people, inadequate understanding of the group's purpose or conflicting personalities.

This can be extremely troubling, for everyone involved. Although it can be challenging, it is important that problems are addressed promptly and appropriately, to prevent things getting worse. Here are a few tips:

- Actively listen to peoples' issues. Understand their perspective before you work towards solutions.
- Be calm, plan what you want to say and do it without aggressive language.
- Take ownership of what you think "when you do this, you make me feel like this. The consequences of no change are this" and then say what you would like to happen.



Peoples' egos can be hurt by confrontation, leading to escalating problems. Things that help include:

Giving people time to cool off after an altercation before raising an issue. It's more likely then that you'll have constructive conversations.

Don't focus on the person - focus on the issue and solution.

If it is a problem between two people try and discuss the issue in private.

Work together to find a solution. Objectively explore the facts, available options and make a decision about how to address the problem.



## Publicity and Profile

Good publicity can make a huge difference. It can inspire people to action, build support for group action and improve your credibility.

Creating a visible public presence in which people understand what you do and why can help you to do much more. Acceptance by the local community is an essential building block of all successful projects. It creates dialogue, which enables you to respond to local needs and concerns. Being open and transparent about your work and how you intend it to benefit people builds this trust. With this, obstacles to action can be avoided and offers of assistance are more likely to come your way.

Creating a memorable public profile will help you, as you make connections that can draw support towards you. People and organisations, including charities, the council and other local groups are usually enthusiastic to support and get involved with groups seen as successful.

The value of good, timely publicity shouldn't be underestimated. It is through this that groups get new volunteers, donations and public support.

Newspapers, radio, websites and social media including Twitter and Facebook are all great ways of raising your profile. The key is to pick the method that suits your community group and intended audience best. Keeping any information up to date on new developments also underpins effective community group publicity.

However, publicity is often sidelined as it is seen as a luxury. Publicising your group regularly will help you keep up the momentum, and presence in peoples' minds.

Creating a role for publicity, where one person is responsible for photographs, writing updates etc. will help you stay on top of this. You may wish to consider advertising this as a specific role, as there are many people who enjoy this type of work. This will leave those more interested in 'direct' group actions to stay focused on what inspires them.

Your local volunteer centre can help you find volunteers for particular roles, as they guide you through writing adverts, placing them and managing applications. The website 'Do It' can also help you find your local centre.

### Quick Tips

When promoting an opportunity for volunteers consider what the motivations and priorities of your target audience are... this can help you choose the information, level of content and style that will work best.



## Top Tips for Publicity

Publicity is effective when it draws people in, makes them stop and read, and attracts them to what is being advertised. However, all too often publicity is too poorly designed to do this. By following a few simple guidelines you can quickly and easily increase the appeal of your opportunity or event.

**Make it clear:** only include essential content. People want to see what you're saying at a glance, so keep words to a minimum and adopt an easy to read format. Fonts, pictures and content that are too small or cramped will overload readers and the message will get lost.

**Make it attractive:** you need to make your advert interesting enough for people to stop and read. Images that are clear, interesting and relevant hook people in to read and can communicate a lot more than words alone. Black and white posters, with blocks of text and pictures are unlikely to hold peoples' attention. Using easy to read fonts that highlight key points will draw people in.

**Plan it well:** decide the key messages you want people to take away and make sure that this comes out clearly in the advert.

Adverts can be tailored to fantastic effect by considering a few simple questions prior to design...

- What do you want to achieve?
- Who do you want to target?
- What are their priorities, interests and assumptions?
- What message would appeal to them?
- Where are they likely to see or hear about events?

There are lots of places you can promote your project. Who you want to reach will determine which will be most effective. Here are some places, which work particularly well.

- Word of mouth: get your friends and supporters to sing your praises
- Posters in shop windows. Think who you want to target and where the shops are that they're likely to go in.
- Newspapers
- Parish newsletters
- Websites – your own or similar organisation's

## Roles and Responsibilities

Every group will have unique roles and responsibilities. When working out who'll do what, taking the time to find out about peoples' skills and interests helps capture enthusiasm and commitment to your cause.

To ensure that people maintain enthusiasm for their work, it's important that everyone is clear and content with what they need to do.

Refreshing everyone's understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the group can be particularly useful if members start to lose focus.

Don't be afraid to say if the work load is too much. It's better that the job is shared, rather than targets are missed or you find it difficult to cope.

When groups become constituted, roles and responsibilities change as certain roles are required. Sometimes formal roles can be forgotten as the day to day activities of getting stuck in with the work take over.

If you are going to have a constituted group, make sure everyone understands the formal roles that are required (e.g. board members), as things can become complex if they are overlooked, leading to confusion and overload.

Be careful no-one has more work than they can manage – remember they are volunteers!

Alternating roles (e.g. a different chair each month) can keep it varied and everyone engaged, as responsibility is shared.



### Further Information

If you're thinking of becoming constituted, there is plenty of information available that can guide you through the process.

Follow the links at the back of the booklet to find how to become a committee, community interest company or social enterprise and the roles and responsibilities associated with each.



## Engaging Volunteers

Volunteers are fantastic! They invigorate a group by bringing in new enthusiasm, perspective, creativity, skills and ideas.

Although the value of new volunteers is widely understood, there are a number of things that can get in the way of finding new recruits. Not knowing how to reach potential volunteers and what information to include are just a few of these barriers.

There are easy ways to engage volunteers that take the mystery out of the process.

Understanding the people you want to attract is the basis for designing engagement methods. By taking the time to work this out you can decide the best approach to fit your intended volunteers. You may need to use your imagination to identify these.

Questions to ask before you decide how to engage...

- What's the profile of the people you want to attract? (Age, gender, home town etc.)
- What skills, experience and level of knowledge should they have?
- What are their motivations? (Share knowledge with younger generation, use skills for social good, develop skills etc.)
- What would they expect from a voluntary position? (Refreshments, loos, training etc.)



Engagement doesn't stop at finding new volunteers. It's important to keep volunteers too! You can increase how long people stay for and how happy they are while they're with you by continuing to assess their changing needs and expectations throughout their time with you.

Everyone volunteers for a reason. By finding out what their reason is on joining, you can decide what tasks will best able them to follow their interests and enthusiasm.

All this is important, not just for new volunteers, but also for those who have been in it from the beginning. Everyone needs to feel like their time is being used wisely!



Making volunteers feel connected, and that they have the ability to make a difference, gives people ownership of a project. Regularly viewing progress, sharing experiences and celebrating successes as a group, is a great way of achieving this.

Opportunities for volunteers to try new things and contribute ideas are other ways a group can keep volunteers interested and active. This gives volunteers ownership of the project. Welcoming new ideas and decision making from all volunteers is a great way to achieve this.



## Network, Network, Network!

Great things come from working together.

Information on funding opportunities, help when you need that extra pair of hands and advice on overcoming challenges are just a few examples of groups benefiting from strong networks.

Networks, or the links and relationships that we have with people and organisations, also help us share information, ideas and advice.

These things add up and can seriously improve your group's ability to weather adversity and grow to achieve great things!

The benefits groups get from being strongly connected with people and organisations cannot be overstated – it can make or break a group's success.

Here are four useful tips on how to build strong networks.

1. Be focused: have a clear idea of what you want to get from a conversation. This way you can increase your chances of cutting out the waffle, covering the relevant points and getting their support.
2. Be generous: a genuine offer of how you can help others is a great foundation for a two-way relationship.
3. Keep your listener interested: Show a genuine interest in their work too. Also talk about aspects of your work that they're interested in.
4. Follow up: Get in touch with the person soon after you make contact to cement your relationship.

There are many people and organisations that it could be useful to make links with, including...

- Local groups, including parish committees, gardening clubs and health centres.
- People in powerful places, including councillors and local MPs.
- People and organizations (including charities and local businesses) that hold similar values.
- You shouldn't feel awkward approaching others to make connections. It's useful for them to be connected for the same reasons!



## Keeping it Comfortable

How comfortable volunteers feel can have a huge impact on the work they do and how long they stay. There are a few essentials that rarely go amiss!

Having access to adequate loo facilities is a must if people are working for many hours at a time. If you can't provide them then local cafés are often willing to provide, especially if you go there for after session coffees!

Providing refreshments can also make a great difference. For many a cup or tea or squash can make the time pass by much more pleasantly. Depending on the group you are working with, more substantial refreshments may be needed to help them work effectively.

Providing enough food to fuel people can determine whether they get stuck in. Biscuits or toast can do wonders for lagging volunteers!

Other things about where people volunteer can also make a difference. Most people enjoy the social aspect of volunteering. By creating opportunities for people to meet, discuss what they're working on and relax, you can build a stronger team and a more fun place to volunteer.

Nothing extravagant is needed. Coffee after volunteering or tea breaks together can make everyone's time more rewarding.

For many people refunding expenses can make or break whether they volunteer. If your group can afford refunding expenses, even if it is only for select events, then it's worth considering. Through providing this support you can broaden your appeal to diverse groups and get more helping hands.

If there is one thing, above all, that can bring out the best in a group it's creating a warm and accepting environment. For example...

- A welcoming face to guide new volunteers through the process.
- Genuine icebreakers and introductions.
- Someone to encourage people to join in and provide support when people need it.
- A person to go to when help is needed who can mediate tensions when they arise.
- An empathy for others and flexibility to volunteers' needs.

We can all take on these roles, and by doing so make people want to come back again and give it their all.



## Growing a Happy Group

### Values

Many people who've been part of a community group have experienced the anguish that can arise from a clash of values.

Sometimes it is not clear why we keep going over the same, seemingly small point. It is often these small, but deeply contentious tensions that hide deeper issues.

Everyone gets involved in a community group for a reason and probably has opinions on what direction it should take.

Through openly recognising when conflicting values are the reason that clashes occur, groups are better able to confront and deal with the root cause of problems.

This is a brave thing to do, especially when bold characters are involved. But facing up to the cause of the tensions and resolving these at the root can help a group get back to doing what it does best – creating positive change!

### Perspective

Innovation and a willingness to try something new are simple things that make a huge difference.

As groups open themselves up to new possibilities opportunities emerge and positive change can bloom.

When weighing up the risk of a new idea it is important to decide whether you want to do what you've always done and get what you've always got, or aspire for more!



### Celebration

Celebration is an important part of any group. Taking the time to appreciate the successes you've had and the progress you've made can develop you as a team, and much more...

Celebrating together makes people feel like they've done worthwhile work that is appreciated. This can keep motivation high and raise enthusiasm for future plans. It is also a great time to have fun as a group, which encourages people to keep coming back.

It's worth investing in these events to make everyone feel valued. Nibbles, drinks, music and an appropriately party like space are key to creating an event worthy of peoples' fantastic efforts.

Events that bring in lots of different people are also a great way to share what you've been doing and raise your group's profile.

## Further Resources

There are many further resources that provide guidance that can help make running a community group easier. Below is a list to get you started:

### How to plan a project

<http://www3.hants.gov.uk>

### How to delegate

<http://www.knowhownonprofit.org/>

### How to write minutes and how to fundraise

<http://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/>

### How to network

<http://www.communitymatters.org.uk/>

### How to facilitate

<http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/>

### How to deal with conflict

<http://www.acas.org.uk/>

### How to become a committee

[www.cvsfife.org](http://www.cvsfife.org)

There are many people and organisations that it's useful to make links with, including...

- Local groups, including parish committees, gardening clubs and health centers
- People in powerful places, including councilors and local MPs
- People and organisations (including charities and local businesses) that hold similar values.
- You shouldn't feel awkward approaching others to make connections. It's useful for them to be connected for the same reasons!