# Forming a Community Group

**Rural Community Network**
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

It is vital that the community is involved in the process of forming a community group from the outset. This may sound obvious, but it is essential to have community support and involvement through the life of the community group, right from the initial stages. The process should be as open and participative as possible, affording every opportunity for community members to be involved.

Rural Community Network has used the simple model of public events/meetings to facilitate the formation of a community group, where none has existed previously. This is by no means the only model for forming a community group and communities need to decide which is the most appropriate model for them to use to progress the issue.

## Gaining Entry
Gaining entry and acceptance into a community is critical. If a good relationship is not established and developed with members of the community, it will not be possible to facilitate development. It is essential to build credibility within the community.

The worker should talk with as many members of the community as possible, explaining who they are, what their organisation does and what they are hoping to initiate in the community. A worker can access a wide range of people by using a variety of techniques including:

- Knocking on people's doors and talking to them on their doorsteps

- Talking to people in places where they would normally congregate or visit on a regular basis, for example, the local shop or the doctor's surgery

- Meeting with local groups or organisations, for example, senior citizen's luncheon club or church organisations

- Meeting with key community members or community stakeholders, for example, the health visitor or school principal etc

This stage of work is extremely intensive and requires the worker to display a high level of motivation and enthusiasm in their contact with the community. It is important to generate a high level of interest and enthusiasm amongst members of the community for the proposed developments. This can best be achieved by talking with as many people as possible and by maximising any public relations opportunities.

## Public Relations (PR)
Ensure that the group makes widespread use of a variety of PR materials to reach the community. Public Relations should always be inclusive. For example, a poster in the village with a cryptic message can generate a lot of interest, but remember to include information on the public event/meeting and contact details. PR materials should be displayed and distributed as widely as possible, for example, announcing a public event/meeting in church notices will only reach those people who are attending church that week – what about those families that do not attend church regularly?

## Public Event/Meeting
While much of the organisation for a public event/meeting to form a community group will be the same as for any other such event, the content will be significantly different. The process may require more than one public meeting.

Issues that need to be addressed, either at the public meeting/s or through some other public course of action, include the following:

- Networking with other communities/ groups that have already gone through the process

- Nominations for the community group (committee) membership. Someone (preferably an independent facilitator) will need to give an input on the roles and responsibilities of the committee to enable people to make an informed choice about whether they wish to make that level of commitment. There should be a way in which people unable to be present at the public meeting/s may nominate others or be nominated themselves. It is also important to try and ensure that committee membership is representative of the wider community. It may take a few meetings before groups have explored all of the issues and are content to move to this stage. Some groups will take a long time to get to this stage and some may never formalise in this way and will exist only for a short space of time to tackle a particular issue.

- Discussion exercises to identify what might be needed in the area and what the issues are for the community. Discussion and agreement on the broad objectives for the community group, including priority areas of work.

- Information should be provided on funding possibilities for both project costs and small running costs that the community group might incur. The main sources of funding and resources should be identified.

- Community members should always have an opportunity to ask questions about any part of the process. If it is not possible to answer questions at the time they are asked, make sure the necessary information is fed back to the community at the earliest opportunity. The community should always be clear on the next steps in the process and when they are likely to take place.

## The Community Group
There are a number of key issues that must be addressed by any community

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group or committee, but particularly by a new community group/committee in its early stages. These issues relate to a number of areas, specifically group processes, relationships between the group and the community and the identification of and response to community needs.

## Group Processes
### Balance/Representation
The membership of the community group/committee should be balanced and representative of the area, for example, male/female; young people/older people; religion; ethnic group; geographical spread; able bodied/people with disabilities; single parents; unemployed, etc. Does the group have an effective mechanism to redress any imbalance and ensure that all interests are represented effectively, for example quotas, co-options? Once achieved the community group/committee will have to work hard to maintain the balance and representativeness of their organisation.

### Teamwork
Each member will bring a different range of skills and experience to the community group/committee. All group members must have an opportunity to contribute at meetings and all members' contributions must be listened to and valued equally. Knowledge and skills should be shared throughout the group, not guarded by a limited number of members. The role of the group leader is crucial to this.

It is essential that all members are treated equally and that none have undue influence because of their perceived or real power in the wider community, for example, a District/Borough Councillor. Teamwork will develop relationships between group members and build trust. Undertaking teambuilding with all the members of the community group/committee at an early stage will provide a good foundation on which members can build a positive working relationship. It should be normal practice

for the group to work together as a team.

### Decision making structures
Sufficient time must be given to agree appropriate decision making structures that will allow for the work of the organisation to be carried out, particularly clear and effective communication channels within the group. There should be an agreed structure in place to address and resolve conflict. Group members should clearly understand the roles and responsibilities for which they are accountable. Appropriate decision making structures can take many forms ranging from a formal committee structure to more informal and flexible arrangements. Community group/committee meetings should have a clear structure and purpose, rather than just being held out of habit.

If the community group/committee is handling or plan to handle any money then they must put in place appropriate accounting systems and safeguards. If the group is in receipt of or is applying for a grant from a funding body, then there will be specific requirements that they have to fulfil. If the community group/committee decides on a formal or semi-formal committee structure, then it will be beneficial for members to participate in committee skills training. 'Managing Together, A Guide To Working Effectively As A Committee' by Jane Clarke (Combat Poverty Agency) is a good resource for committee skills training. Information on drawing up and adopting a constitution and deciding on legal status can be obtained from the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA).

## Relationship between the group and the community
### Community Involvement
It is essential that the community supports the development of a community group/committee in the area. Group/committee members need to ensure that they remain in touch with the wider community. Members of the community should be enabled to participate in the

life of the group and the decisions that the group make on their behalf.

### Information/Communication
The community group/committee must have a structure that will facilitate two way communication with the community. Again the community group/committee needs to decide on the most appropriate ways to facilitate the exchange of information. There are a number of ways in which this can be effectively achieved and these will develop over the lifetime of the community group/committee. For example:

- Public events/meetings
- Annual General Meetings
- Information events/meetings
- Publicity materials/newspaper articles
- Needs Analysis/Community Auditing
- Community notice board or other focal point
- Community news sheet or magazine

## Identification of and response to community needs
### Needs Analysis
The community group/committee should be aware of the needs of the local community (these may be different from the needs as perceived by group/committee members). The community group/committee needs to consider engaging in a community audit or other form of needs analysis (probably at five year intervals) to ensure they remain in touch with the changing needs and issues that affect the community.

### Action Planning
The community group/committee should have stated aims/objectives and a plan of action to achieve these. Group/committee members should have a clear understanding of the action plan and the resource implications. Group/committee members must be confident that their action plan is addressing the identified needs of the local community.

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