

Establishing a Community Group

There are many reasons for setting up a community group - they usually start with an individual or group of people who feel there is a lack of something in their community or there is an asset that needs protecting. Some groups start with a patch of land, others start with an aim. Very often these things evolve organically and do not follow a stepwise procedure. Nevertheless, ultimately, funding bodies will want to see evidence that your group has been democratically elected with a constitution and a bank account.

1. Talk to the parish council:

- For many reasons it is helpful to include your parish council early in the process.
- Many volunteer community groups operate under the auspices of the Parish Council as very often Parish Councils own land that can be managed for nature.
- It also helps with both finance and insurance (see below).

2. Define your focus or site:

- You do not need to *own* land - there are alternatives eg. leasing, managing land belonging to others, including private individuals, parish councils, trusts and local authorities such as utilities.
- If a major development is likely, is there an opportunity for a planning gain?

3. Hold an Annual General Meeting (AGM)

- Gather the group for your formal group for your first 'AGM' where you will need to write a constitution and elect a committee (see below).

4. Define your aims & write a constitution:

- What do you want to achieve and how will this benefit the community?
- Keep the aims broad and general so that you don't limit your future activities
- Identify similar groups in your area already in existence, try and avoid any overlaps between them, or consider working in partnership.
- A constitution explains how your group will be managed, from the aims and objectives of the group through to how meetings are to be run. The constitution of your group does not have to be complicated and should reflect how you wish your group to be managed.
- Formally adopt constitution at AGM, and the committee need to sign it.

5. Elect a committee and define management roles:

- A Management Committee is the team of people who are legally and financially responsible for the group.
- People on the committee will help lead the group and will be responsible for the day to day running of the group, so make sure you all share the same aims and passion.
- The committee should consist of a chairperson, treasurer, secretary and at least 5 other members.
- Ideally the management committee should have a varied skill set.

People and Nature – Making Connections

- Whether or not the group is operating under the auspices of the parish council it is often useful to have a member of the Parish Council is on the community group committee.
- Anyone can elect another member to a position however it must be decided by vote who takes a position.
- It is possible for individuals to act as chairperson and secretary whilst organising the first AGM, but they must give up their position when the committee are to be elected.

6. The key roles are:

Chair - Leader of the committee, the chair oversees the group's overall direction. They are responsible for:

- Ensuring that actions agreed are followed
- Representing the group to outside bodies when appropriate
- Signing sensitive letters on behalf of the group
- Ensuring that decisions are made, agreed and summarised so that everyone understands

Secretary – a wide ranging role that includes:

- Asking members what items they want to be included on the agenda prior to meetings
- Sending out the agenda, minutes and reports of meetings
- Receiving, filing and presenting all correspondence to group members at meetings
- Taking minutes at meetings or delegating minute-taking to a named individual
- Keeping up to date lists of members and contact details
- Filing all of the paperwork associated with the group
- Dealing with correspondence

Treasurer - The treasurer looks after the financial operations of the group. Their responsibilities include:

- Overseeing and controlling the group's finances
- Checking and paying the group's invoices and bills
- Keeping the group informed about the funding situation
- Coordinating and helping with funding applications
- Preparing the accounts at the end of each financial year
- Making sure that group members are reimbursed for any expenses they incur on the group's behalf
- Ensuring that funds received are spent on the purposes for which they were given

5. Finance:

- If the group is operating under the auspices of the Parish Council and not registered with the Charity Commission, then money collected from charitable sources can be paid to the Parish Council for responsible disbursement to the group.
- If a group is not operating as a Parish Council volunteer group it will benefit by having charitable status.
- 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.
- The signatories must be members of the committee, usually the chairperson and the treasurer.

6. Insurance:

- If the group is operating under the auspices of the Parish Council then some limited insurance cover can be provided under the average Parish Council's very extensive 'Local Council' policy, which normally includes some basic cover for volunteers, who can be insured (at no extra cost) to use any tools normally used in DIY work, but significantly NOT chainsaws.
- Insurance cover for local groups can be expensive. Insurance and liability issues become more complicated when volunteers work on land owned by a third party, and for that you would need an insurance broker's advice.
- You could also join the Trust for Conservation Volunteers and get insurance through them: <https://www.tcv.org.uk/community/join-community-network>

7. Legal: There are a number of different types of legal structures available to community groups.

- When a group of individuals come together to form a group it is known as an unincorporated association which are quick and cheap to set up.
- This structure is ideal for small groups with a membership, short-term goals, low incomes and which 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. This means that any legal proceedings taken against the group would, in reality, be against the individuals themselves. In other words, if you are a committee member of an unincorporated association you are personally liable for your group's actions.
- Many groups are now registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). The reason for doing this is to give the trustees the protection of incorporation. Learn more: <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/cio-structure-right-you/governance/article/1459581>
- After these stages are complete you will be a fully a constituted group with a committee and a bank account, the next stage is to start working towards your groups aims and objectives.

If you need help with any of the above Oxfordshire Council for Voluntary Action offer training courses: www.ocva.org.uk/training/ or phone 01865 251946.

8. Funds - Cash flow is a significant factor for your group and having enough income over the first 12 months is vital. Remember to factor in the long-term cost of running and maintaining your site after the initial push. Plan how to generate funds, eg:

- donations at events
- membership fees
- grants
- applying to local and national charities for funding
- 'land fill' funding
- match funding

9. Generating publicity and support:

- Let everyone know what you are up to - you will need more than just your friends involved and you will need to draw on local expertise from many sectors.
- Create a website or insert a link into the parish website so that people searching for a group in their area can find you. The Parish clerk can help.
- Use social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, to spread the word throughout the community.
- Think about flyers or QR codes to reach out to dog walkers and joggers or adverts in the parish news and local newspaper to advertise your activities.

10. Time to get to work:

- Before you do anything, survey your site really thoroughly to find out what lives there already and how wildlife is already using the site – you don't want to make things worse!
- Identify any historical biological records for your site (TVERC, NBN Gateway).
- Based on the survey results and biological records, consider what species can realistically be attracted to the site and what species, already there, could have their populations enhanced.
- Draw up a long-term plan that includes maximising the potential of the site for wildlife and monitoring it. You might need to:
 - leave some areas wild and untouched.
 - restore existing habitats
 - create new areas of habitat
- Always consider connectivity and look at how your land links to the wider network of wildlife corridors and important sites for wildlife in the landscape. How can your land function to expand this network.

We are always trying to improve this document so if you have any comments or anything to add please contact roselle@wildoxfordshire.org.uk