

Factors to Consider when Setting up a Community or Voluntary Group

Published 10th September 2018

Many community and voluntary organisations begin as an idea for change on the part of one or two people, which when shared with like-minded others, helps to create a core group of supporters. Whether the idea will move beyond the initial “brainstorming” stage, is dependent on a range of factors. If you are in the early stages of planning to set up a group, here are some of the factors you will need to consider.

My Top Tips

- Check that a similar community or voluntary group does not already exist
- Find at least 4 like-minded people to form the group with you
- Be clear about who will benefit from setting up the group
- Use networking as a tool to help find potential management committee members

Why am I doing this?

This is not a philosophical question, it's a practical one! Before you set up a new group, check that a similar community or voluntary group to the one you have in mind does not already exist. There are several ways to do this. If it's a locally based group you wish to set up, talk to people in your community who know what's happening in the area. Visiting your local library would also be a good idea, as staff there are often aware of the support groups and community and voluntary organisations operating in their area. If another group of people are already formed to tackle the issue you want to address, then there is little point in starting a competing group locally.

If your remit is likely to be county or citywide, then check the list of organisations registered with the county or city community forum. You should contact the relevant council community and enterprise directorate or office of the county development board to see if a publically accessible guide is available. If your group is likely to have a wider geographical base, then consider checking the published list of registered charities on the www.revenue.ie database. You can also search the list of registered companies in Ireland on the Companies Registration Office website at www.cro.ie. And don't forget to do a relevant word search on the Internet and social media platforms like Facebook, Youtube and Twitter! If you are happy that you are not attempting to “re-invent the wheel”, by setting up your group, then move to the next stage.

Who will benefit from setting up the group?

This is a most important question to answer, because a considerable amount of time (and sometimes resources) can be required to become established. It is essential to know in advance that all of this effort is likely to be worthwhile! Therefore, you need to get a real sense of the number of people that are affected by the issue you are trying to address, how many people are likely to use whatever supports you may be planning to deliver, and how much support you can reasonably expect to receive from the community at large. There is a diverse range of ways in which you can get a sense of the “size of the market” for what you want to do. If your group has a local remit, then talk to relevant people who support the potential beneficiaries. For example, if you want to provide support to parents, talk to local teachers, General Practitioners, community education facilitators, women's group members, childcare providers, family resource centre staff and members of other community groups. They will act as a sounding board for your idea, and give you their opinions on the scale of the issue you are trying to address and whether or not setting up the group is feasible. You should also survey people in your area, either by using a

questionnaire or by asking a small group of people (a focus group) to talk to you about your idea. This will be helpful in giving you a sense of how likely people are to access the supports you may be

considering providing. It will also provide you with an insight into whether or not the community at large is likely to have any particular positive or negative reactions to your group.

If your group is likely to have a wider geographical or national remit, consider expanding the range of people you survey/meet with to adequately encompass the region. You should plan on carrying out at least 20 in-depth “one-to-one” interviews with relevant people (those who have knowledge or experience of the issue you are trying to address). The resources required to set up a national community and voluntary organisation are often considerable, so it is well worthwhile doing as much research as possible before committing to this course of action.

If at the end of your research you are happy that there is sufficient “demand” to justify setting up your group, then move to the next stage!

No one is an Island – get some help!

If you are going to set up a community and voluntary group successfully, then there should be at least four other committed people running the group with you. This group of people is collectively referred to as the management committee. It isn't possible for one or two people to run the group on behalf of everyone else indefinitely. Therefore, sooner rather than later, you should actively seek out like-minded people to join the group, preferably with a view to them becoming active members of the management committee.

Finding people to join the management committee can be approached in several ways. Talk with your family and friends to get their insights into who might be interested in getting involved with your group locally. You may also have identified potential “committee members” when researching the demand for your community and voluntary group in the previous stage. You will need to contact these people – in person – and ask to meet them to discuss the aims of the community and voluntary group you wish to set up. In addition, you may also find it worthwhile to call a public meeting, openly inviting people who are interested in the cause you are trying to address to attend. Advertising in local parish newsletters, the local library, supermarkets and newsagents and in locally read newspapers will help to circulate information about the meeting.

If your group is hoping to attract people from a small clearly defined geographical area, like a village, you might also consider producing a small flyer announcing the meeting date and time and dropping the leaflet through people's letter boxes. This can be time consuming – but can be very effective!

There are two important points to bear in mind when you announce that a public meeting will take place. Firstly, be very sure that you can explain the purpose of the meeting and what you hope to achieve by setting up the community and voluntary group. Secondly, be prepared for the fact that people who may be interested in receiving support and assistance from the community and voluntary group will also be interested in attending. You will need to think through how you plan to manage the expectations of those people who attend the meeting in advance of it taking place.

Lastly, remember that networking is also a very powerful way of identifying potential management committee members. Therefore, you should plan to attend events, seminars, open days and meetings organised by other people and groups. In addition to meeting new people and having an opportunity to discuss your ideas for your community and voluntary group, you may also meet people who are enthusiastic about what you plan to do and are prepared to give a practical helping hand when asked! Networking will prove essential if you plan to solidly establish a group with a wider geographical or national remit.

The Beginnings of a Community and Voluntary Group

Arising from the previous stage, you should have identified at least four other people who are prepared to form the core of a functioning management committee for the group. You should also be prepared to allow this “management committee” to drive the work of the group forward. Remember that once more like-minded and committed people join the cause it is no longer simply your group or your idea!

The newly formed management committee will collectively have to decide the aim(s) and objectives of the community and voluntary group and will need to collectively decide how to share the workload amongst members of the group. Though one or two people will lead the management committee, it is critical for the future success that the management committee members all feel collectively responsible for the running of the group. At this point, the beginnings of a community and voluntary group are in place.

References

Carmichael Centre, 2006, Setting up a New Voluntary or Community Group, Carmichael Centre for Voluntary Groups.

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