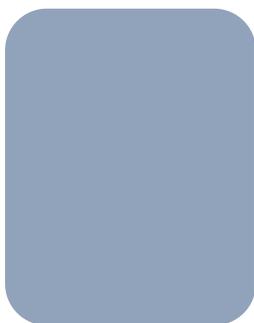


How *Not* to Support Small Groups



Hull CVS
'community and voluntary services'



This factsheet is designed to provide food for thought for development and support workers, to help you consider some of the issues arising from your involvement with small groups, and think about how best to help them, and help them keep safe, without protecting them from what are, after all, their legal duties.

When any group of people comes together with a shared purpose that is not about making a personal profit, and create a legal agreement between themselves (which probably happens when there is money involved if not sooner), then they have formed an Association.

Many of the small groups you work with are probably Associations – they might be called something like a Parents' Group; Tenants Association; Community Group; Self Help Group; Pop in; Club etc. But most of them will be some form of Association.

In taking on their roles, the committee members of such groups have accepted a set of legal duties, and many a well intentioned development worker or support worker inadvertently puts them in breach of these duties by over-doing the help they offer.

helping you make a difference

Here are ten handy ways to *not-support* the group:

1. Be on its committee.

Yes, But...	But No...
It's a new group and needs help	You can help without being a committee member. And are you really accepting the duties and responsibilities of being a committee member? Are you committed to this group outside your working hours? Can other committee members ring you up at the weekend or in the evening to talk about things? If not, then you aren't actually accepting your legal duties as a committee member, and your place is alongside, not among the committee members.
None of the other committee members has any experience	One of the best ways you can help is to point them to information and training. They will learn and gain experience and they have a duty to seek advice when they need it.
It's my job	It might be your job to <i>support</i> the group. But your employer is unlikely to indemnify you from any liabilities arising from your role as a committee member. You cannot be a committee member and not share in the same responsibilities as the rest of the committee.
I need to keep up with what they're doing	If the group feels well supported they'll keep you up to date all the time.
They want me on it	You need to discuss why and what support you can offer.

2. Attend all the group's meetings

Yes, But...	But No...
They need my help	The committee is responsible for its meetings and that includes who they invite to them and why. One of the most important ways you could help them is to show them that they are in control of their meetings, and only attend if expressly invited. And then, speak <i>to</i> the committee, not as part of it. The committee must never be allowed to feel that it cannot meet alone, or without external input.
I need to keep up to date with what's going on	If the group feels well supported they'll keep you up to date all the time.
I have to have evidence of supporting groups	You could make an agreement with the group about how you will support it. You can keep other evidence such as a diary, correspondence, a record of the queries that you've dealt with from the group, and information you've supplied to the group. You could even create a monitoring form for your work, recording the things you agree to do and the outputs you achieve, and ask the group if they would be happy to sign it for you. They will probably be delighted.



3. Be a signatory to its bank account.

Yes, But...	But No...
The committee are nervous about taking full responsibility for the funds	They already <i>are</i> responsible for the funds, and need to exercise full control to fulfil that responsibility. If they're unable to sign their own cheques by themselves, then they need to consider whether they're ready yet to have any funds. If you do it for them, it sends them the message that they can't do it. Instead, why not help them get information and training about how to manage their funds.
They might need a cheque at short notice and can't get their signatories together	There are hardly any things that will need paying immediately that can't be foreseen. Bills usually have a payment period, or the supplier can be contacted to tell them when they can expect their cheque. If one crops up at short notice, it's through lack of planning and foresight which are skills you could help the group to develop. Remember, signing cheques is authorising money to be drawn out of an account. How can you do that when it's not your money?
I want to keep an eye on how they're spending the money	The <i>committee</i> is responsible for the group's money, not you. If you have concerns, you need to alert the committee to the likely outcome of their actions. If it's really serious, maybe you should alert the funder who gave them the money. But you do not have any authority over the group's finances. You could help them much more by helping them to learn about managing finance, and helping them put appropriate financial controls in place.

4. Keep all the group's papers in your office so that they can only access them through you.

Yes, But...	But No...
I want to make sure it's all safe	It's the committee's responsibility to safeguard the group's property and records. They can't do that if they don't have free access to their own things. You would be better helping the group to identify a more suitable arrangement. Could your organisation make some storage available to the group? Or can you help them find an office or room?
They can't keep it all at someone's house	They can! Many groups do. The group needs to decide what is the best way for it to manage its affairs, and safeguard its property and records. If they want it, you could help them find an office or room of their own.
What if people leave and there's a new committee?	The committee are responsible for safeguarding the group's property and resources. You would be better helping them to plan handing things over when there is a change of committee members, and helping remaining committee members tackle former committee members if they fail to return items.

5. Write applications for grants for the group

Yes, But...	But No...
Nobody in the group has the skills or confidence	Skills can be learnt and confidence developed. Better that they start now and grow. If you do it for them, it reinforces their lack of confidence and confirms to them that they can't do it themselves.
They asked me to	Groups do have a misguided believe that they can't write applications for grants, that there is some clever language they need to use but don't know. By agreeing, you only confirm that belief. You need to focus on helping them
They don't have any time, they're busy running their meetings	Unfortunately applying for funding is a core part of the work of running a community group. If they don't have time to fill in the form, are they going to find time to administer the grant? Report on it? Collect any monitoring and maintain the records they will need? You would do better helping them do some planning to fit all these responsibilities in.

6. Act as point of contact or a go-between, meeting all the other people and agencies who could support the group

Yes, But...	But No...
It's more efficient if I go and find out what the group needs to know and pass it on to them.	The committee is responsible for managing the affairs of the group. One of the duties on them is a duty of care, which implies that they have to seek the advice they need when the need it. They need to have the contacts and the confidence to do that by themselves. If their only access to other sources of information and advice is through you, they never will.
The group knows me and trusts me	That's fantastic! But ideally they also need to also get to know and trust others in a position to assist them.
I need to know these things myself so that I can support other groups	The committee is responsible for managing the group's affairs and needs to be able to do so. Your development needs are a separate issue which you need to address with your line manager. They should not create a block to the group's own development. You can contact CVS for advice and guidance for yourself to help you in your role. Our GAFA Guide is designed for just that purpose. But we will always prefer to speak directly to the group about the issues the group needs our support with.
Nobody in the group can take the pressure or stress of being the main contact	The committee is responsible for the group. You could offer facilities to help e.g. taking messages for them or offering your office as a c/o address. But you must respect that the messages and mail belong to the group and all you do is pass them on. It's not your place to speak for the group, open their mail or deal with their messages. Doing so reinforces their belief that they can't cope.



7. Push the group into stages of development when it's not really ready.

Yes, But...	But No...
My post is only for a short period so I need to get them set up and independent in that time.	Will they be truly independent if they don't get there at their own pace? If you know you're not going to be around to support them for long, then make sure you encourage them to find other sources of support. Then they will have someone else to approach after you've gone.
If they don't get a committee and constitution ready now, they'll miss the deadline for some funding.	If they're not ready, they're not ready. There will be other funding another time. Loading responsibility for funding on a group that is not strong enough is really not fair. If anything goes wrong, that committee could be liable for some of that money. Setting up an organisation and adopting a constitution is a serious commitment, not an administrative detail. If they rush and don't get it right, it will cause them more problems in the long run.
We need them to take on this project or it won't happen	That suits your organisation, not the group. Loading responsibility for a big project on a group that is not strong enough is really not fair. If anything goes wrong, that committee will be liable. If the group is not ready, you will need to find another way of achieving this project. But bear in mind, some groups will never progress and will always be tiny and informal. If that's what's right for that group, so be it.

8. Pursue your own work and personal development goals through the group

Yes, But...	But No...
I've got targets to draw down funding or engage the community etc	The group exists for its purposes, not yours and it is unfair to push it into helping you achieve your targets. Those are your targets, not the group's targets. If your targets are badly framed, and rely on the performance of groups you support, then you need to go back to your line manager and discuss re-framing them, or finding other ways of monitoring them.
Working with this group is a chance for me to get certain experience	That's fine as long as you are led by the group not the other way around. If opportunities with the group don't include certain things you hope to do, then you'll need to discuss with your line manager how else you can get those opportunities.
I need to write up my work as part of a learning assignment for a course I'm on	If you need to do that, by all means negotiate with the group and ask them if they're happy to be your case study. But you can't presume that you can use your work with them without asking first. You will also need to agree things with them like confidentiality. And do have the courtesy to show them your assignment, and let them know the outcome, and thank them! Most groups will be thrilled and interested. Let them share in your pride when you pass your assignment.

9. Direct the group

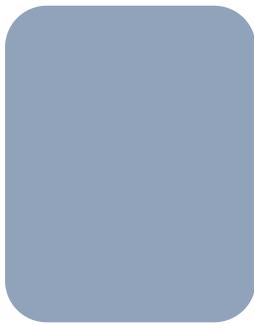
(telling it what to do and stopping it doing things you don't think it should do)

Yes, But...	But No...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our organisation needs to be sure the group respects things like diversity, and that the group manages its money properly, otherwise it reflects on us.	Your organisation could do a lot to encourage small groups adopt best practice. You might even make some of these things a requirement before the group may use the resources you offer. You can certainly have discussions with the group about best practice, and offer support to help them achieve it. But ultimately if the group decides to ignore you, all your organisation can really do is withdraw from its relationship with the group. Trying to control the group is just bad practice in itself, as it puts the committee in breach of its duties.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I'm worried that the committee are overstressing themselves and I want to protect them from too much pressure or stress	The group must make its own decisions. Otherwise it can't truly claim to be in proper control of its own affairs. If you make a mistake, and steer them in the wrong direction, it won't be you that is responsible, it will be the committee. So you're actually not protecting them from anything. You can help them think about how they will cope with difficulties, and negotiate with them what support they would like from you. But all you can do is offer your comments and suggestions.
I don't want to see them get it wrong	We all learn from our mistakes, and small groups are no different. They <i>will</i> get it wrong sometimes, but to be a strong group they need to know how to put things right and get themselves out of trouble. You can help them learn about this by helping them learn to think ahead, and decide things themselves, rather than by steering them away from all problems.



10. Tell the group it can “borrow” your organisation’s Charity number

Yes, But...	But No...
They're too small to be a charity	It is unlawful for an organisation that is not a charity to claim to be one. Charitable status and Charity numbers are not transferable and it is unlawful for an organisation to use another organisation’s Charity number. If you tell the group they can do this, they will believe you. If the group, however tiny, has purposes that are legally charitable and it exists for the public benefit, then it probably <i>is</i> a charity. The law sets out what purposes are charitable. Once an organisation that is charitable reaches the threshold of an annual income of £5,000 it must be registered with the Charity Commission, which is how it gets its Charity number.
They need it to raise funds	An organisation does not have to be a charity to raise funds. If it is not charitable, it just won't benefit from all the same tax advantages such as being able to claim Gift aid. If it is a small charity that is not registered, it may be able to register with HMRC to claim Gift aid. But claiming charitable status to raise funds, when the group is not a charity, or using the Charity number of another Charity is fraud. If you tell the group they can do this, they will believe you.
But we set them up	If the group is an activity run and governed by your organisation, or bound to it by both your constitutions, then it's your organisation that is requesting funds, and will be accountable for them. The group needs to be able to make that clear to funders and donors. If the group is autonomous, with a separate constitution and committee that makes it clear that it is a distinct and separate group, then it must not use your organisation's charity number.
But they're a member of our organisation/network/forum etc	Charitable status cannot be bought into as part of membership of, or affiliation with a charity. If you tell the group they can do this, they will believe you. Charitable status is determined by the group's own purpose which is written in the objects clause of its constitution, and not from any membership or affiliation it has with your organisation.



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