

So you are thinking of starting a voluntary group.....

What is a voluntary or community group?

A voluntary or community organisation aims to achieve specific aims within the community – usually to help a particular group of people or a cause. With the right planning and support, you can go a long way to making a difference in your local community.

Most types of community group are known in legal terms as an unincorporated association. Unincorporated associations do not need to be registered, nor are they regulated in any way.

Step 1: So what is it that you want to do?

You need to have a good idea of exactly what you intend to do. Here are some questions to consider:

- Will your group offer a service to a community or will it solely benefit its members?
- What are the aims of the group?
- What do you want to achieve?
- What geographical area's are you going to cover?

In order to move onto the next step, you will also need to have at least two other people who are committed to your group, you can then look

Step 2: Who will you work with?

If you are providing a service then you may want to identify a specific group of people with whom you are going to work, for example people affected by a specific issue or living in a defined area. You should also think about what area you will cover - For example, will you only cover a specific local neighbourhood or a whole town or city? Be realistic with your capacity and where you can make the most impact. **Don't overstretch yourself.**

Step 3: Does your project idea already exist?

Once you have put some consideration on how it might work, you need to research and find out if there are any existing groups that already do similar work in your given area. **It is much harder to find support and funding if you are duplicating what other groups are doing.** So make sure that your big idea is 'new or unique' in some way before you start. If there are already groups doing the same work, perhaps you could get involved with them?.

Step 4: Collaborate with others

If you have a new idea and are ready to go, can you work with other organisations to create something new or benefit from their experience? If you are in a similar geographical area, then you could perhaps share premises and work together for the benefit of both groups.

Step 5: Structure and documentation

An unincorporated association is a group of individuals coming together to achieve specific aims within the community. At this point your organisation has no separate legal identity but you will need:

- **A set of rules or a constitution** – SAVS can offer model constitutions for you to adapt
- **A management committee** - to make decisions, manage finances and decide on the direction of the organisation
- **A shared purpose or activity** – usually to help a particular group of people or a cause

(If applying for funding then dependant of the funders' requirements other documentation such as 'equal opportunities policy' or public liability insurance may be required).

As an unincorporated association, you have a greater level of privacy because you do not have to disclose who your members are, how you operate, or how you keep your finances. However, because you have no separate legal entity, members are personally liable for the organisations debts or other claims.

As your community group grows and develops, you may consider registering as a charity. (If you are to employ paid staff, own land or premise, or deal with finances of over £5,000 then you must register as a charity with the Charities commission). To register as a charity you can consider various legal structures and will need to select the form that is appropriate for you.

The charities commission website has useful advice for groups aiming to register as a charity.