

TIPS ON SETTING UP A LOCAL CAMPAIGN OR GROUP

The reason there are so many problems in our society is because all the decision-making and resources are in the hands of those 'at the top' - ordinary people like ourselves barely get a look in unless we organise ourselves and stand up for our interests and concerns. This can be in our communities where we live, or where we work, or around an issue we feel strongly about. By getting together we can share our views, experiences and skills and empower each other to make a real difference. We are all experts on our own lives! This leaflet gives tips on how to organise a group.

Some of this may not be relevant to your issue or concerns but we hope that you find at least some of it useful. Some may seem very obvious to you. All sorts of people start local groups and campaigns, so we've tried to cover many of the options. On the other hand, don't despair if you find all this a bit daunting - you can survive with far less information & organisation than this! Take what is useful, do what you can, & don't expect too much too soon. But please DO IT!

Getting Started

If there's already 2 or 3 of you wanting to get something going you could get together for an informal discussion about what you want to do.

When you are ready, publicise your existence – or intent to set up a group - by word of mouth, emails, leafleting and networking etc. Decide on a date for your first meeting & put the word out.

For your first meeting keep it simple.

- a) Go for a small venue (unless you expect 100's to turn up). Better a packed small place, than an empty huge place!
- b) Set chairs in a circle to try to involve everyone.
- c) Be clear about what you want to achieve. It is better to present potential members with a clear lead that they can respond to. If you are vague about what you want to do people will be less likely to join. Consider what will the group do? How often will the Group meet? What jobs need to be done & by whom? How much commitment can people give?
- d) A name for the group/campaign!

That is a lot to cover in one meeting, so don't overdo it. Keep it short & interesting, preferably with a social session afterwards. It's probably best to start out small, keeping things simple at first. As you grow in numbers & confidence you can work on more ambitious projects. The most important things to decide at the first meeting are when the next one will be & what it will try to achieve.

For more on Painless Meetings, see below. Hopefully you now have a core group of keen people & a rough plan of action.

First Steps

Start small. Stalls, leaflets & basic conservation are easy & empowering. Once you are organised, you can get down to the business in hand.

Stalls Stalls serve to spread information, get more people on board, raise your profile & maybe help with fundraising too. Choose a busy place like a market, main shopping street, outside the Town Hall or near a busy bus stop... Other good places might be fairs, jumble sales and other events already happening. Contact the organisers of upcoming events and arrange to have a stall. You can work with something as basic as a wall papering table & a hand painted sign. Have your own leaflets & petitions and ask other campaign groups working on similar issues for copies of theirs too. That way you can help each other get information out to more people.

Campaigning Key factors in a successful campaign include:

- i). If you are opposing a problem, start while the monster is still small. Squash the idea before it becomes established.

- ii). Plan carefully.
- iii). Keep each other (and the wider public) well informed and involved, and keep morale up

Action includes letter writing, petitions, lobbying, leafleting, demonstrations, occupations, vigils, and various direct actions etc.

Evaluation is always worthwhile. After a public meeting, action, demonstration or whatever, spend a bit of time evaluating how useful it was. What was good/bad about it? What did you learn? What problems arose & how could you prevent them next time? You could do this at a meeting or at an informal social event.

Organisation The best idea is to do it together as equals, collectively and in a friendly manner. The trick is to be well organised and efficient (to get things done), whilst also promoting informal networking and initiative.

Key roles in a group can include:

- i) Chair or Facilitator (see 'Painless Meetings' below).
- ii) Co-ordinator(s) for specific activities - those most involved with a particular issue or campaign. They will need to think on their feet & know the basics of the issue - keep track of what is being done/needs doing & who is doing it.
- iii) Support/Fundraising.
- iv) Publicity/Publications.
- v) Secretary – keeps all the paperwork, membership details, ensures reports of meetings are done & circulated...
- vi) Treasurer; opens a bank account & keeps basic accounts.

Of course you can be effective with less than this but if you are lucky you may have enough people for all these roles and sometimes you may even be lucky enough to have more people taking on roles. Try sharing roles eg joint secretaries.

Be wary of overloading one person. Delegation of responsibility is vital. Rotating key roles helps prevent 'burnout', encourages involvement & is potentially very empowering. It's not always practical, but do consider it. Keep a notebook &/or a ring binder for paperwork, and also organise your group's emails into separate mailboxes.

Record and retain information on key contacts, strategy, minutes from meetings, events diary.

Systems to keep people informed are the lifeblood of any group. Newsletters, email lists, websites, flyers, telephone trees, meetings & (most of all!) conversation. Use the local grapevine. You'll probably start out with a close knit group of key players. Hopefully this will branch out into a network of friendships that keeps everyone in touch & allows people to get involved where they feel most comfortable. Most people join groups to do something, not just talk about it. Involve people, especially new members.

Painless Meetings

The first question is where? Pubs can be a good option, especially if they have a back room you can use, but you may find alcohol and noise don't make for clear decisions and can exclude many people! Alternatively, meet at a community venue (good for larger meetings but costs money and there might be booking hassles) or a member's home (free, easy and friendly for up to 10-12 people, but some people prefer 'neutral' venues). Again rotation helps spread the load, but it helps to have a regular venue & time. Make sure everyone knows when & where well in advance.

A good meeting should be an enjoyable creative interaction. Too often they can get long, tedious & draining! Parkinson's 'Law of Triviality' states that *"the time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to its importance."*

What you can aim for

- * Commonly understood goals. Where do we want to be?
- * A clear process for reaching those goals. How do we get there?
- * Involve people in decision making. Work for a consensus. Consensus is when people all agree to go ahead with a proposal rather than voting on it. It can be time consuming but (almost) always worth it.

- * Energy & enthusiasm.
- * A sense that it is a meeting of real people talking together

Key principles you could follow

- Start the meeting on time. Difficult I know, but this is important if the meeting is to stay short & sweet. Choose a facilitator/chair and a minute-taker. Have a name go around at the start of the meeting. If they are new to the group, they may say a little about why they came.
- Try not to go on longer than two hours. Try to keep the meeting to one hour if possible.
- Have an agenda. Ask everyone if there's anything they want to add to it. Have 'any other business' at the end. Make sure the agenda deals with urgent /important items first. If you can't help going over time it's sometimes better to note less urgent items (rather than just drop them), and agree to discuss them in more detail at the next meeting.
- Have someone briefly introduce each agenda item. Give a bit of background if necessary.
- Keep the minutes brief, but do keep minutes. They help keep things on course & save time in the long run. Record important decisions. This should be done by someone other than the facilitator.
- Try to get people to agree to do something concrete. 'By the next meeting I will xyz.' Remind them at the end of the meeting what they agreed to do.
- Have one item which involves creativity /fun if you can!
- Keep to the agenda, & try not to let anyone dominate the meeting.
- Make sure everyone knows when & where the next meeting is. Ideally, have some idea of what that meeting will be about.
- Try to leave time to chat and socialise after the meeting - this is often the time when things have ticked over a little and the more creative ideas and / or solutions pop up.

What is a Facilitator? The Facilitator keeps the meeting focused & moving. It is the same as 'Chairing', but without bureaucracy and too much formality. The facilitator (and everyone) needs to:

- * Keep the discussion relevant. Avoid repetitions & tangents.
- * Summarise points made. Remind people what has already been decided & sum up the alternatives open to the group.
- * Ensure that everyone who wants to speak is able to.
- * Make sure no-one dominates the meeting.
- * Achieve all that without dominating, imposing their own views, or alienating anyone!

Tough huh! Rotate this role if you can. It's good for the whole group to get a taste of Facilitating a meeting.

In general Encourage everyone to participate. Keep an overview of the issue being discussed. Keep the meeting within time limits. You might want to elect a timekeeper to help with this.

Resources

Skills Everyone has skills to offer. You need to find out who can do what. Who's into word processing and computers? Can anyone do cheap/free photocopying? Design leaflets? Do translations? Deliver leaflets? Has anyone done campaigning and organising before? Share your knowledge, skills and resources.

Contacts Contacts are gold. Members of your group will have contacts of their own. Use them! Useful contacts can include

- * Local press and media. Named journalists are best. Or email all of them.
- * Other groups who are working on similar issues/campaigns/projects.
- * Council reps and departments

Fund-raising You can only do so much without some dosh! Fund-raising can be fun & helps bind the Group. Do something you will enjoy. Try something involving benefit gigs at local venues, food/parties etc. Face painting etc can be fun & effective. Members can put in their own donations, or you can have a suggested membership fee (which might put people off from joining!), or you could apply for grants (but would generally need to develop some sort of constitution).

Putting on the Pressure

You have written letters & done some publicity etc – but the problems roll on. Now it's time to get serious!

Evaluate the group/project Define your aims. What is the problem? What do you want to achieve? Research can be vital. Know your issue and who you are up against. Find the weak spots, inconsistencies & contradictions.. If possible provide an alternative to their plan, or a vision of your own.

Think about how those causing the problem might backdown, come to agree with you eg:

- they might get lots of hassle, bad publicity, and lose money.
- they might lose votes &/or public support.
- it's more effort/expense for them not to agree with you!

Tactics

Publicity Use the media including any independent media (see www.indymedia.org.uk). Go for original & very visual stunts. Choose a time when there is little competing news - Sundays & Bank Holidays are ideal. Keep the letters pages full of debate.

Create communication networks Email lists are pretty essential thesedays. Websites can be essential too. Dedicate an ansaphone to the campaign to carry daily updates. Phone each other.

Leaflets, petitions & letters Leaflets are about communication, so keep them simple & clear. Be accurate & be aware of the tone of the leaflet. Who is your audience? What do you want them to do?

- * Have a HEADLINE to catch the eye, followed by the relevant facts:
- * Who, Where, What, When & Why.
- * Use as few words as possible. Highlight the most important points.
- * Include a clear contact number. Don't use phone numbers without permission.
- * Check spelling & grammar. Don't overuse exclamation marks!!!
- * Distribute them in good time.
- * Flypost - but watch out this is illegal.

Petitions can be useful as a way of talking with supporters, but personal letters carry a lot more clout. Keep them brief, polite, clear & accurate. Ask questions to avoid 'standard replies'. Follow up your first letter as soon as they respond (or if they don't!). Organise an evening of campaign letter writing. You provide a venue, sample letters, background information & addresses. If you can afford it, supply stationary & stamps.

If you want you can go through all the various official channels, lobby officers, Councillors and committees, make complaints, etc. But don't rely only on that!

Also consider: Street Theatre. Vigils. Organising an Opinion Poll. Producing an Education Pack for local schools. Boycotts and non-cooperation. Protests.

Use Direct Action This is often very effective as part of a broad campaign and should not only be seen as a last resort. Direct Action means getting physically involved. It doesn't replace other campaign tools, but is used alongside more conventional methods. It is very empowering. If it is properly planned & well executed it will also be fun & effective. Direct Action is good for publicity & can stimulate public support. It can be a bit scary the first time, but that's true of anything unknown. Find someone with experience to guide you if you think that might help.

Use direct action as part of your overall strategy. It can also demonstrate a constructive alternative, eg occupying an empty building to convert it into a community centre. If you can, make it humorous, visually interesting & fun.

This document is based on a pamphlet put out by a group called HN4S. I've no idea what that stands for or who they are!

For more information and support contact existing networks like the Haringey Friends of Parks Forum, the Haringey Federation of Residents Associations, Sustainable Haringey network, Haringey Association of Voluntary & Community Organisations, Haringey Trades Union Council. Or contact us:

Haringey Solidarity Group: www.haringey.org.uk info@haringey.org.uk 0845 2235270