

The National Consumer Federation

Grassroots Group Guide



EVERYONE IS A CONSUMER!

Each time you shop, pay bills, get your car serviced, use public transport, health and care services, or a bank, eat out or visit the dentist - you are a consumer. Remember, public services are paid for by you, the taxpayer.



WHY SET UP A GROUP?

Joining up with like-minded people to do practical work at a grassroots level, or linking up to start and run a campaign means that you can be much more effective and can achieve more than doing it on your own. There are usually one or more 'triggers' that lead people to consider setting up a grassroots consumer group. It may be a single issue or broader concerns that local voices are not being listened to or even heard. Working together to achieve change can be very powerful.

WHAT DO CONSUMER GROUPS DO?

Local activities can include:

- setting up and running a campaign to defend grassroots causes that are consumer-related
- writing a Newsletter for members
- using the local press, radio, TV and the internet to reach a wider audience
- keeping in touch with your Council departments and local traders, residents associations etc.
- campaigning to improve local facilities - shopping, transport, sports centres, schools etc
- surveying local and Internet goods, shops and public and business services — prices, availability and standards of service
- producing local guides to facilities — eating out, schools, access for the disabled, leisure facilities
- speaking about the work of your group to other grassroots organisations
- working with schools on consumer education projects
- putting the consumer view to service providers - such as BT and Royal Mail, and to gas, electricity, water, railway and bus companies
- Responding to official consultations on such matters as health and social services, traffic measures, planning proposals
- linking with other voluntary groups.

Being part of a group of concerned grassroots people is interesting and enjoyable - this Guide is designed to help you to set up a grassroots group which may be to campaign for a particular issue or as a group acting on more long term issues.

The National Consumer Federation links together and supports self help, self supporting groups who are acting in the interests of grassroots consumers with the NCF representing grassroots consumer views nationally.

Groups campaign locally and on a wider basis using the Internet, and through the Federation, can come together nationally to bring greater 'weight' to their causes. Overall helping to make things easier and fairer for us all.



Improving hygiene in food shops, helping to protect your town or village against floods, checking on broadband coverage - you name it, groups investigate it!

NCF offers help in setting up new groups and continues to support them. It provides grassroots consumers with an avenue to national government, manufacturers and service providers. It works closely with other consumer organisations and is often consulted via its National Policy Committees for its ideas, opinions, experience and knowledge, both nationally and internationally.

SETTING UP A GROUP

First, share your enthusiasm for starting a Group with individuals and other grassroots organisations you know, and identify people you feel confident will become active members of the team. Then talk to NCF - we will provide some advice on getting things under way, and running a group in the long term.

Plan your first meeting

It is quite likely that you have a local issue for which you want to gather support or opposition. This could be the planning permission for a new local supermarket, alterations to a familiar traffic system or access for the disabled. Think carefully about your objectives and goals in tackling the issue(s) and be prepared to modify these aims in the light of your group's discussions when you meet. Think about the immediate and longer term, so you are ready to answer questions when you meet.

You might also need to consider the resources you will need to establish and maintain your group (see 'Funding your activities' below). Set the date for your first public meeting and book a suitable room. Choose somewhere

accessible and avoid a clash of dates with something else important locally or something 'big' on TV. Email or phone the local press and radio/TV stations to tell them what you have done so far and to outline your meeting plans. Keep the media with you every step of the way.

Two or three weeks before the meeting put details on your posters and a contact name on leaflets. Distribute these to shops, leisure centres, libraries, doctors' waiting rooms, Citizens' Advice offices, Parish Council notice boards and so on. Visit people you feel would be supportive of your Group, and invite them to the public meeting - Trading Standards, your Volunteer Bureau, the Environmental Health Officer, local councillors or people from advice centres - these are potentially all good friends to local grassroots Groups.



Who will Chair? Who will speak? Will you serve refreshments? Check over the logistics — parking, directional notices, chairs, hot water for the tea etc.

Now is the time to plan one or two specific activities for your new group members. People will want to know at the first meeting what the Group is going to do, and how they can help. Concrete plans for action will help stir imaginations and attract media attention. A survey to establish just what the issues are, and what the general public thinks about them, may be just what is needed at this stage. If you have decided that you want a formal membership for your group right from the start, design a membership leaflet or form. In any case you will need to make sure that people leave a note of their name, address, phone number and email address, so be prepared with pens and paper.

Until the meeting, keep talking to the local media and encourage newspapers to write an article about the meeting and your plans for the future of a Group. Some towns have a Market Stall to advertise voluntary group activities; this would certainly be an ideal opportunity to discuss local issues and to get a feeling about what is concerning people in your area.

A week before, make sure your local media publicise the meeting. Check that posters and leaflets are still on display. A few days before, remind the people you have invited, and check that your team is ready.

On the day — enjoy yourselves and do remember to have decided the date of your next meeting so you can tell your audience.

Funding your activities

Although much can be achieved with minimal funding, at some stage you'll need to think about the resources you'll need to achieve your objectives. A small membership fee may be all you need to charge for meeting rooms, printing and postage, and, we hope, membership of NCF.



However, if you are going to undertake surveys and campaigns, or, especially, if you're going to need more legal help than can reasonably be expected for free, you may need to bring in larger sums of money.

Local businesses or professional bodies may be willing to sponsor newsletters or other such materials and you may be able to seek sponsorship or make appeals for specific projects. Some groups have built up fighting funds over a period of years against the day when a major, costly, issue arises.

PROJECTS AND SURVEYS

These are the mainstay of most Groups. Members choose topics of current concern to them in the area — local 'Letters to the Editor' or radio phone-ins may give useful ideas if you don't already have a cause that you wish to promote. Here are some useful pointers:

- Decide what you want your project to achieve and the best way to set about it. Keep it simple.
- To get information, work out a short and relevant questionnaire. Always give clear, concise instructions to your volunteers; if you are surveying shops, for instance, it will be helpful to decide who is to visit which ones.
- Within your Group team, always decide who has overall responsibility for a project, and agree a timetable in advance.

Perhaps you want to campaign to get a bus stop moved so that users can get better access to it — you will need to gather reliable evidence to support your case. Then you will need to find out who decides where bus stops are sited (bus company or council) and present your evidence in written form, with photographs if possible.

Some questionnaires are aimed at finding out peoples' opinions (the bus stop), other questionnaires are finding out facts (prices, sizes, availability in shops).

Internet Research

A tremendous amount of information is available freely on the Internet especially if you take a bit of time to research. Taking up to a couple of hours at a time trying different phrases put into the search engines (Google and other search engines are available) can bring surprisingly useful research and information to support your case and your cause.

If such information can be found use it to help make your case.

Checklist

- What do you want to achieve?
- How will you go about it?
- Test run any questionnaires to see how effectively the information can be recorded.
- Are your findings reliable?
- If necessary, double-check.
- Consider conclusions carefully — are they justified by your evidence?
- What is the best way to use the information you have gathered?



Then, looking at all the evidence, decide how best to present and follow up your conclusions. When dealing with ‘the authorities’ it is important to understand the people and processes that they expect issues to be raised through and try to use those as much as possible until you feel that you are not making progress.

Making full use of your research and evidence may involve telephone calls, letters, emails and press releases. Consider what is useful information to pass on to Group members, what is newsworthy for everyone in your area, or, indeed, further afield through NCF.

SOCIAL MEDIA, WEB SITES, NEWSLETTERS AND MAGAZINES

These, in one form or another, are your first line of contact with members and the outside world. Not only will they inform followers and readers, but also attract attention from the local community. They are, of course, an excellent and concise way to keep telling the local media what the Group is doing.

They are also something tangible that members will get for their subscriptions, where you make use of subscriptions of course, and, as such, are vitally important to maintain interest and ensure that people renew their membership in the future.

Members will always want to know the outcome of their projects, including how these are being followed up. Be sure to announce future visits and meetings in good time – last-minute notification can be very annoying both for members and the media

You need to be careful over copyright issues regarding the incorporation of published articles - which will be subject to other people’s copyright - and with the use of disclaimers.

If you start using social media then make sure that you have enough volunteer effort to maintain your presence and that you use responsible language to get your views across.

The NCF can offer you Group web pages as part of its own site that you will be able to put your own content on and run as your group's web site if you wish. A small annual fee may be needed to help NCF cover administration costs as the NCF site has more facilities than are normally available on free web services.

Your web site, publicity and publications reflect your image



Use social media with care and when you can in publications aim at the best presentation possible and include your Group's name and the date of publication wherever possible. Remember to give at least one contact name, address, phone number and, if possible, email address. If you use subscriptions then the amount should always appear with clear details about how and why to join the Group.

Be sure to have a legal check made on all original material before issuing a formal publication. Find a friendly local solicitor who will read over what you have written (for free!) and advise you if you should make any changes.

Decide who in your Group will be Editor. Consider whether someone else might support the Editor with the task of publishing and being active on social media. Even if you're the Editor, there is no need to write every word yourself!

Questions to ask yourself on a regular basis:

- Does your reader get the impression of a lively, active Group?
- Aim for interesting content, clearly presented in a readable manner.
- Headings attract attention, as do illustrations or photographs.
- Start main articles at the top of a page.
- Avoid the "continued on page xx" trap, which can be extremely annoying to the reader.
- Will casual readers be tempted to join your Group, and is it made clear how?
- Will your publication be available only or hard copy or both?

GETTING MORE MEMBERS

A lively Group, with varied activities, which is seen to get results, attracts new members.

It is vital to keep on recruiting new members, all year round, to develop a wider range of ideas, interests, experience and knowledge. Even if you started the Group with one campaign in mind, you can help the Group to survive by extending your activities to build on the basis of the work already done.



There are many different jobs for people to do in a Group; surveys, writing for the web site/magazine, producing and distributing it, contacting prospective speakers and arranging group meetings and visits.

Early on you will need to identify someone to look after the financial side of things, of course, as well as the “secretarial” work. It is also useful to recruit people with social media, web and computer skills to help produce attractive material for publication and keep an eye on finances.

There are activities in a Grassroots Group to interest everyone – local planning issues, getting involved in the development of car parking facilities, campaigning for improvements to train and bus services, highlighting problems with the local Council, finding ‘best buys’ locally, warning about ‘dodgy’ practices by firms, looking at leisure and care facilities (or the lack of), offering advice about local doctors and hospitals, getting things repaired - the list is endless.

HOW TO ATTRACT NEW MEMBERS

- Tell people about your Group either face-to-face or online via a blog or Twitter - word of mouth is always the best publicity
- Really get to know who does what at your local newspaper and radio station - target material at an individual, know who deals with the grassroots issues you are concerned about and get them to mention the Group as often as possible.
- Be keen to give talks to other local organisations - remember, other people are always on the lookout for speakers too!
- Make sure there is a permanent Notice on the display board at the library at the very least. Is there a rack for leaflets? Make sure the librarians know of the Group’s existence and ensure you are on their local reference listing.
- Keep in close touch with people at NCF – we want to keep on helping you.

USING THE MEDIA

Local papers, radio, TV and the Internet

These are all important for getting your message across to the local community. It's time well spent to get to know your local reporters by name - always address letters or reports to them personally. Items without people's names on can easily finish up in the waste-paper bin!



Anything you want printed must be easily legible (preferably typed and double spaced). It must have a contact name and phone number so a reporter can discuss it with you.

If you want to chat informally, start by saying 'this is off the record' and be sure to get agreement to this. When journalists approach you for comment, give yourself time to think or check facts — offer to ring back in a few minutes or at a specific time. Journalists invariably give the impression they need an answer at that moment but, by simply asking what their ultimate deadline is, linked to your need to check your facts to improve their article, you can often buy some time to collect your thoughts.

Distinguish between your personal opinion and the agreed views of your Group. Remember to ask radio and TV for travelling expenses and a fee for the Group fund, although you won't always get both.

Ask an interviewer or their researcher:

- what the first question to you will be – this is not unreasonable (and to some is standard practice) and means you can be more prepared – but they may still ask a different one!
- if you can mention how people can contact you — maybe they can write to the programme if you don't want to give an address 'on air'.

Every time news about your Group appears in the local media, it's free publicity for the Group, so keep at it - one small item every month is much more effective than a saga once a year!

If you are a regular blogger, or use Twitter, be sure to mention grassroots group activities. If you have run a successful tasting test, or a demonstration to gather popular support, make sure that a video goes up on YouTube.

TELLING YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

Giving talks is a valuable link with other organisations in the community. When invited to speak, establish clearly what you are being asked to talk

about, for how long and how much time will be allocated to questions? Find out about the organisation that is inviting you. Find out about your audience's special interests — how many are expected? - men and women? - all ages? Prepare your talk to suit work out a lively opening — get your listeners' attention by commenting on a current grassroots issue.

Have a clear pattern to your talk; explain new ideas and information clearly. Include amusing examples, if you can keep them brief and relevant. Avoid jargon. Remember to mention how to join your Group and why. Whenever relevant, mention Group activities and show the audience Group magazines. Have a prepared closing sentence to round off your talk.



Giving talks - Points to watch

- Can you be seen and heard? Ask!
- Establish eye contact with people to left, right and centre — avoid fixing your gaze on one spot.
- Keep an eye on a clock or watch to ensure a punctual finish. But don't make it obvious; put your wristwatch on the table where you can see it.
- Put out plenty of Group information/membership leaflets and welcome new subscriptions on the spot. Take a receipt book.
- Take some spare back numbers of your newsletter or magazine to sell cheaply or give to interested people.
- Take plenty of other consumer-oriented leaflets with you — everyone likes free handouts to take home!

GETTING THINGS DONE

Your projects, surveys and Group discussions will identify improvements you want to achieve where you live.

So, how do you go about it?

- Work out who you need to contact — a shop manager, your local councillor, the bus company, your local doctors?
- Work out what you want to say before writing or making an appointment to see them.
- If the issue is dealt with nationally, not locally, contact the NCF to see who else may be involved in the same issues and aim to bring greater

‘weight’ to bear by working with others.

- Be ready to explain what your Group is and does; take the Group’s information leaflet to give to them.
- You must justify your proposals e.g. with survey results.
- Listen to and note the points they make; remember times when you’ve complained “They did not listen or note a word I said”!.
- Reasoned discussion achieves more than having an argument!
- Report back to your Group and decide the next step.
- Use your web site, social media and or magazine to help keep your people in the picture and to attract members who support your aims.
- Consider your next move to maintain momentum.

CONSUMER AND GRASSROOTS COMPLAINTS

A Group may receive requests for help with complaints. The NCF’s national policy is to refer enquirers to specialist agencies.

This is because you may be held legally responsible for advice given in your name, it is probably safer to pass complainers on to the right agency. This usually means the local branch of Citizens’ Advice, or Citizens Advice help telephone service.

Should a Group wish to become more directly involved that should be done by looking at the issues raised by an individual complaint to see how many others are affected. This may involve a project to research the scale to which similar issues are being faced by others and then building a case for improvements based on much more than a single complaint.

NCF members past experience is that acting as a group with evidence about a larger number of complaints, all of the same nature, can be much more effective than struggling on as an individual trying to get something done about it.

Further the NCF “brand” makes a difference and can add status to the group’s activities