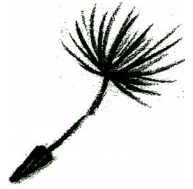


Effective groups

Starting them up and keeping them going

A guide to successful group organising



Seeds *for* Change
www.seedsforchange.org.uk

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Introduction

By getting together with a few people you can usually achieve lots more than you could on your own: whether that's to create a community garden, fight for racial justice in your neighbourhood or see off a new nuclear power station. A bit of thought about how you organise, make decisions and look after your relationships within the group will help you do great stuff together, and enjoy yourselves in the process. We believe that learning to work together as equals not only helps you be more effective and sustainable in your group, it is also a small part of building a better world.

In this guide you'll find tips, examples and questions to help you create a group that is inclusive and effective. Every group is different, so use your judgement about what would work for you.

Finding the right people to join in

The success of your group depends hugely on the people involved in it. For a group to be effective its members need to have enough in common to work together, both in terms of aims and ways of working. At the same time, there can be benefits to finding people are different from you in other ways - having a range of perspectives, talents and interests can strengthen your group.

What do you want the group to be?

Before looking for people to join, ask yourself *what* you'd like to achieve, and *how* you want to work.

Example: Imagine you want to set up a campaign against a proposed fracking site near where you live.

1. *What do you want to achieve?* Do you want the campaign to be only focused on fracking? Or do you also want to put out messages about community renewables, and other alternative ways of getting energy? If there are other groups already working on the issue, why is yours necessary? Is it there to give a voice to people who live in a particular

place? Or for people who want to pursue the same strategy?

2. *How do you want to work?* Do you want there to be a steering committee who makes the important decisions? Or do you prefer a structure where everyone is involved in shaping the direction of the group?

Answering questions like these will help you write a clear invite for the first meeting so that people who turn up have a good idea what to expect. It will also help you work out what is *necessary* for you in the group, and what you want but could be more flexible about.

Being flexible may make it easier to find people who feel ownership and want to commit their energy. On the other hand, if they don't agree with your core purpose in setting the group up, there is very little benefit in working together, so be as clear as you can about the things that are really important to you.

Inviting people to join you comes with a responsibility – to let the group become theirs as much as it is yours! Even within the same core purpose other people will have different priorities and approaches. Incorporating everyone's views will take work and may involve you letting go of some of the things that you wanted to work on.

You may also have to be flexible about your ways of doing things so that everyone can participate fully. For example, be prepared for people arriving with different expectations about how to behave in meetings. E.g., how formal should they be? How long is it OK for one person to keep speaking? Is it acceptable to show when you are angry? Be ready for it to take a time to learn to work together. And if someone's style is different from yours, it's not necessarily because one of you is 'wrong!'

Putting the word out about your group

You will probably want to create some publicity to invite people along to your first meeting or event. You may have other information to put out, e.g. about the issue you want to campaign on. This can also be an opportunity to publicise your group. These tips are aimed at reaching and appealing to a wide range of people.

Use a wide range of publicity methods: social media, fliers through

people's doors, a stall in town, posters in cafés and shops, events listings, writing an article in the local paper, or speaking on local radio.

Expand the number of people you can reach by researching places for publicity that aren't already familiar to you. For example, ask other local groups if they have a comprehensive list of the noticeboards in town and ask them to share your publicity by email and on social media.

Making face to face contact helps build a stronger connection with the people you are inviting. Think about running stalls in town, door-knocking, doing a brief talk at other group's meetings.

Make your publicity eye catching and easy to read. Ideally, have a limited amount of writing, high contrast between foreground and background and large, clear fonts.

Think about your group's image. How can you come across as friendly, open to all kinds of people, and ready to make a difference? Check that the images and words you use match the image you want. For example, a leaflet that just lists scary facts about your campaign issue could be intimidating; adding the right picture and a few words showing the potential strength of the campaign could encourage people to join.

Checklist – any info you put out should:

- Include the group name (once you've decided it)
- Explain what the group is
- Give contact details (email, phone, social media)
- Provide easy ways to get involved, e.g. meeting dates
- Use straight-forward language and not too many words
- Include pictures that put across the image you want

Organising outreach events

For many people, coming along to an event such as a film screening or a talk is an easier first step than a meeting. It gives people a chance to get a feel for the group and is less of a commitment. You could hold a film-showing, an info-evening, or a bring and share meal - with plenty of opportunities for informal chat as well as people sitting and listening!

Try this:

Have a couple of events and meetings in the diary at once and list them on your publicity. This way, if someone can't make the first date, they get more opportunities to come along later.

Make links with existing groups

Find out who else is active locally, regionally and nationally. Established groups can support you with tips you can learn from, resources you can borrow or events where you can publicise your group. Once you get going you may be able to return the favour. Getting in touch with related groups will also help yours be part of a wider community - not a rival or an isolated bubble. It is even possible that the group you want already exists, and if so, you can just join it!

Effective meetings

You've done great publicity and outreach and now it's time for your group to get going. Your first few meetings and events are a great opportunity to set the right tone for how your group will work together. It is common for people to come to a group once to check it out – and if they go away feeling inspired and welcomed they are much more likely to come back, and get actively involved.

Our guides *Facilitating Meetings* and *Organising Effective Meetings* have more on how to have effective, fun, inclusive meetings. Here are some

tips to get you started.

Finding a time and place

For later meetings you can ask people what is best in terms of time and place, but for the first meeting you will have to make your best guess.

Make your venue as accessible as possible to different people. The perfect space is hard to find, but try to consider:

- Practicalities like wheelchair access and acoustics/hearing aid induction loops.
- Transport - can you get to the venue by public transport, on foot and by bike? Is there easy parking, especially for people with limited mobility?
- A space where different people feel comfortable. In particular, pubs and cafés can be off-putting for people who don't like being around alcohol, can't afford to buy drinks or find it hard to hear over background noise.
- Somewhere free or cheap so people don't have to pay to come to meetings. Try community centres, village halls, libraries, office buildings and religious buildings.

Choose a time of day that is best for most people - no easy task if people work different shift patterns, parents need to come out after putting kids to bed, and other people want to finish early in order to catch the last bus home. Avoid clashing with the meetings of other similar groups.

Meeting different needs

There are a lot of different needs to be met from your meetings – look for a good balance! It is important to spend time getting to know each other and building relationships, and also to make decisions and get things done. Some of you will be very motivated by long term questions like finding the right wording for your group's aims, other people will want to get on with more practical, immediate things.

There will also be all kinds of varying personal needs and preferences going on: in confidence to speak, ability to concentrate, how much time to spend weighing up the options before coming to a decision, what kinds of comments you find rude/funny/useful/aggressive, etc.

Two of the key skills for effective group work are finding creative ways of meeting everyone's needs, and respecting the contributions different people bring. For example, could you have a mix of practical and strategic agenda items in each meeting? Could you use practical tasks like banner-making or leafletting as a way of spending fun time together?

Facilitation/chairing

Meeting facilitation is about helping the group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. It involves most responsibilities of a traditional chair person - but isn't a power role. A good facilitator shouldn't have any more influence over what gets decided than anyone else - they just help the process of making the decision. Like most important group roles, it can be done by the same person every time, it can be rotated or it can be shared out between a team of people. Facilitation tasks include:

- **Making sure meetings happen**, and setting a suitable time and place.
- **Organising an agenda**. An agenda is a list of things to be covered in the meeting. You could have an agenda template with standing items to be covered each time. Additional items would ideally be added and circulated in advance so people had time to think.
- **Organising the discussion** in a way that helps everyone participate and hear each other, e.g. summarising the discussion to help focus, keeping the conversation to one topic at a time, making sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

Taking good minutes

Minutes are a written record of the meeting, covering the main points of discussion, the decisions reached and what task people have taken on. Minute taking is another role that could be rotated from meeting to meeting.

Make sure your minutes are accurate - check the wording of decisions by reading them out and circulate draft minutes for everyone to check over. Make sure any action points have a *name* and a *deadline* next to them. Write the minutes so that someone who wasn't at the meeting would be able to understand them. Avoid jargon, in jokes and personal shorthand.

Keep your minutes for future reference, either paper versions or electronically. Make sure everyone who needs to can access them - online file sharing facilities are good for this.

Sample Meeting Agenda

Welcoming and introductions

How the meeting works

Review last minutes and action points

Report backs

Standing items (e.g. fundraising, publicity, events)

Break - tea and biscuits!

Other items

Small group time (e.g. drafting leaflet text, planning next fundraiser)

Any other business (e.g. announcements)

Dates for next meetings and next facilitator

Next social

Questions to work out

There are a few key questions which will shape the direction the group goes in. Spending a bit of time at the beginning working out what you want may save you from false starts and the bad feeling that can arise when everyone has made different assumptions. Whatever answers you come up with to these questions now, you can always revisit them later.

What's the purpose of the group?

It's important to have clear and agreed aims for the group. You will all

have unvoiced expectations about the purpose of the group and you can't simply assume that they are the same.

Have an honest discussion about what you'd like out of the group personally and what you want it to achieve. This might include things like 'make new friends' and 'have fun' - meeting needs like these may also be important if people are to stay involved long term.

Where is the overlap and where there is difference? What are your priorities as a group? Does it make sense for you all to be in a group together? For example, if you are setting up a 'housing' group you might find that you are all interested in more affordable housing locally - but some of you want to set up housing co-ops, and others want to campaign for better provision from the council. In this case you might be better off having two separate groups, but coming together as a network to share resources and put on events.

Writing down your aims will give you a reference point for future decisions, and could free people up to get on with things in the name of the group. It will also make it easier for new people to understand what the group is about. Good aims are specific enough that they give you direction, but not so specific that they limit you. For example, if you were setting up an ecological community growing project, your aims might be things like: provide opportunities for local people to gain food-growing skills; increase biodiversity in the land you manage etc - but nothing as concrete as 'buy some land' or 'set up a farm'.

Try this:

You could have a go-round where you take turns to say what you want from the group while someone writes up what you say on flipchart. Or you could each write down your motivations on post-it notes and then cluster them to see the common themes. Be ready to notice and discuss any differences - look for resolutions that will work for everyone.

Choosing a name

A good **name** is a snappy way to communicate your identity and purpose to people who don't know anything about you. Deciding on a group name can be a great chance to be creative together. It is also important that you get it right. People may infer a lot from your name and first impressions count. It is a good idea to run your name past some people outside the group to check whether it is unintentionally off-putting or unclear. Your name should work well wherever you use it – on the phone, in your logo, on signs. Avoid very long names and complicated spelling.

Who can be part of the group?

Making a clear decision about who can join the group will help you give a clear answer if people ask about getting involved – and help shape the kind of publicity you do. Here are some options:

Your group might be **totally open** – anyone who agrees with the aims can join.

Or it could be **completely closed** – you have enough people to do what you want to do, and for whatever reason prefer not to invite anyone else to join you.

Some groups are **temporarily closed**. For example, a few people could work closely together to get a project off the ground, and then get new people involved once it's up and running.

Other groups are **open to people who meet certain criteria**. For example, a benefits claimant's union might only be open to people who are currently claiming benefits.

We have written this guide on the assumption that any group might have new members at some stage - even a closed group might need to get more people involved if someone leaves or their project expands.

How will you make decisions?

Your process for making decisions has a big impact on how easy it is for different people to shape the direction of the group. Different methods will be appropriate in different circumstances - your group may even end up using all of them at different times.

Whatever you use, it's easier for everyone to participate if you make clear agreements about what you want to use and when. Share this with new people getting involved, and be ready to explain how it works.

Consensus decision making: a group using consensus is committed to exploring an issue, until they come up with a solution that everyone affected can actively support or at least live with. Consensus works well when people really engage with what others are saying and are creative about finding ways forward which address everyone's concerns. Advantages of consensus are that people feel more respected and so more connected to the group. Decisions are more likely to be implemented because everyone had a hand in making them.

Voting: the issue is discussed, and then a vote is taken on a proposal. If a majority agrees with it, it can go ahead. Some groups use 'super majorities', where two thirds (or more) of the group have to vote in favour. Advantages of voting are that it can be quicker than consensus, and if people aren't confident to express their opinions in discussion, at least they can show they don't like an idea by voting against it.

Hierarchy: a committee, or individual leader, is chosen to make decisions on behalf of the group. If you want to work as equals then this system isn't ideal. However electing leaders who can be voted out again may be more democratic than an 'informal hierarchy' where a few people slide

into a leadership role without the consent of the whole group.

If you want to be as democratic as possible, be prepared to work at it! For example, notice whether everyone is expressing their opinion, and consider how you could make it easy for people to voice their needs. Our guides on *Consensus Decision Making* go into much more depth on this topic.

How will you organise your work?

There are various tasks that most groups need to fulfil: sorting out money, publicity, organising meetings, developing a strategy, dealing with the media – plus all the work associated with whatever it is you are set up to do. A clear agreement about your organising methods helps everyone know how they can get involved, and feel confident that the tasks they aren't involved in are still covered. Whatever methods you use, check whether a few individuals are getting over-loaded with too much work, and work out how new people can become active, responsible members.

Here are a few options for how you can split up these tasks. Many groups use a combination of these options.

Individual roles: you could choose a treasurer, a chair/facilitator, a communications officer etc. The people in these roles could be elected, rotated or self-appointed. Giving these roles to individuals could have the benefit of clarity – everyone knows who is supposed to take responsibility for a task and there is clear accountability if they don't do it. Plus everyone knows who to turn to if they need help with a particular task, e.g. they know the membership secretary can contact everyone in the group. It can work well when a few individuals have more time and energy than everyone else. On the downside, this system can result in a few people being much more connected to the group than others, and may not encourage shared responsibility.

Working groups: the same roles could be taken on by a group of people, e.g. the finance group, the media group etc. One off tasks like organising a particular event could be taken on by a sub-group in the same way. Instead of relying too much on one or two people, you can spread out the workload. This method can make it easy to incorporate new people into a

meaningful role. A possible pitfall is that working groups could become cliquey - so work hard at staying welcoming to new folk. A working group model relies on trust. Make sure each sub-group has a clear remit for what everyone else wants it to do, keep up communications about what each of you is up to, and create mechanisms for feedback if the main group doesn't like what the sub-group is doing.

Everyone does everything: each task could be allocated in a one-off way in meetings, rotated between different members, or could be done by everyone together. In a very small group this can have the advantage that all members get a good overview of what's going on, and may feel more connected to the group as a whole. It can also stop individuals from holding on to jobs that other people may also want to do - or getting stuck in a role they don't like. In practice it is common for individuals to take the same role all the time even if the group hasn't consciously chosen them to do it. This can end up in a situation where some people have more power than others, but because it isn't acknowledged it is harder to hold them to account. If it is important to you that everyone does everything, a clear rotation system may be more effective than waiting to see who volunteers.

Case study: splitting up work

Anytown Feminist Group had two main priorities in how they split up their work: getting things done efficiently and making it easy for everyone in the group to share responsibility, ownership and power. They created a rotation system for as many tasks as possible: meeting facilitation, minute-taking, organising the monthly street stall etc. They set up a finance working group to manage the bank account, and rotated membership of this so one person joined and someone else left every 6 months. They had separate, smaller meetings to create publicity and build a website - everyone in the group could go to these if they wanted to, but important decisions were taken to the main meeting. They ran occasional training sessions, and used a buddy system to make it easier for people with less experience to take on tasks.

Who will be involved in what decision?

As the group grows you will need to make hundreds of decisions, ranging from what kind of biscuits to buy for meetings to developing a five-year-plan. Being clear about who needs to be involved in what can help you be more effective. The group is most efficient if decisions can be taken by a smaller number of people – and most democratic if everyone fundamentally affected gets to input. Here are some options to consider:

- Could the whole group decide on guidelines or broad agreements and a smaller group work out the details?
- Does the decision affect people who don't come to meetings? For example, at an allotment site there might be just a handful of people who usually come along to make decisions, but you could create a quick online survey for other plot-holders to feed in their priorities for the yearly budget.
- Are there particular people who are more affected than others and should take a lead in the decision-making?
- Are there some decisions which can be made by an individual or sub-group - but they need to report back to everyone else afterwards? For example, working groups could offer progress reports at the start of each meeting. That way the whole group gets an overview of what's going on, and can input if necessary.

Case study: inclusive and efficient decision making

Anytown Community Centre is run by the people who use the space. They have monthly meetings - and in practice only a handful of members ever turn up. They use a three-monthly newsletter and a noticeboard in the building to keep the wider membership up to date. When the roof developed a leak they needed to make decisions about how to raise the finance to fix it. Options included a significant raise in the rates they charged for people hiring the space - so they wanted to give these people chance to feed in to the decision. They announced an extraordinary general meeting well in advance, and rang up everyone who regularly hired rooms to check they knew about it. There were two people who used a room every week but couldn't make the meeting - they fed in by explaining their views over the phone beforehand. Following the meeting several new working groups were set up to pursue different strategies for raising the money. At each working group meeting, they appointed someone to commit to going to the whole group meeting to report on their progress, and to pose any questions that affected the group as a whole, e.g. a request for the community centre to front the money for a fund-raiser.

Accountability within the group

Groups are more effective, and morale is higher when tasks get done in the agreed time frame and within agreed guidelines. Holding someone to account isn't about punishing them – there may be all kinds of good reasons why they didn't do what you expected. It is about protecting the group from the break-down of trust and motivation that happens when decisions are made and not implemented.

Check you all have the same understanding of decisions taken. You could be using the same words to mean different things. Concrete examples usually make for clearer communication. E.g. if you decide the food for your events should be 'ethical' you could each give examples of

food you think fits this criteria.

Make clear agreements when you delegate a task. For example, if a couple of people take on a funding application, decide together when it should be written by and what activities the group wants to apply for?

Find ways to check that things have been done. E.g. checking action points at the start of meetings, using an online tool everyone can access to tick jobs off when they are done. Or you could have a rotating role to check in, remind and support people when their deadlines are coming up.

Get used to giving feedback. Boost morale by noticing when someone does something well, or works particularly hard. It is sometimes also necessary to tell people that we are disappointed or frustrated. Learning to talk more openly about stuff when it happens can help prevent it happening again, and make our relationships more honest and warmer.

Toolkit for delegation and accountability

- Online task list – tick off when done
- Action points in minutes – checked at next meeting
- Appointing someone each month to send out deadline reminders
- Evaluation meetings after a big event
- A regular slot in meetings for people to raise concerns
- Written policies saying what a role involves
- An agreed process for complaints and conflicts
- Keep decisions and action points where everyone can access them
- 'How to' documents that give instructions for tasks
- A written summary of how the group works and how decisions are made (e.g. a constitution)

Constitution and bank accounts

Your constitution or written agreement

Now that you've worked out your purpose and how you'll operate, it is a good idea to write this up in a document. Make sure new members can access this document when they first get involved. This saves you re-visiting the discussion, and makes it easier to communicate who you are to new members and the outside world.

In more formal groups this is often known as the constitution. It is a statement of the group's aims, how you make decisions and who can be a member. The Seeds for Change website offers a sample constitution that can be downloaded and adapted to your group.

Bank accounts

Many banks and building society offer a group bank account that requires more than one signature for each transaction - which is good for accountability. You usually need a group name, constitution and an extract from your minutes authorising named people to set the account up.

Keeping it going

In order to be effective long term there are a number of issues that you need to consider – and bearing them in mind from the beginning should give you an easier ride. Many of these issues overlap - for example, being more strategic will make it easier to be sustainable. Our resources section points you towards more in depth support.

Strategy

An agreed plan for your project or campaign can help you pull together towards a limited number of objectives. In order to make your plan more strategic, try to:

Analyse your situation to look for creative ways to have most impact with the least effort. For example, it might not be easy for a campaign to influence the main company behind the development it is fighting – they are probably pretty committed to the thing they are doing. However, you might be able to influence some of the players that they rely on: the contractors who carry out the actual work, the local councillors who give planning permission, the organisations who are financing the project.

Concentrate your energies. You can achieve a lot more by focusing on one or two things at a time than trying to do everything at once. Work out what is the most important thing to do – and do it well!

Try to **escalate** your activities, rather than starting with a bang and fizzling out. This is better for your morale, and creates a stronger impression in the outside world.

Building trust and relationships

Building up trust makes it much easier to navigate tricky decisions or deal with problems that arise. When you trust each other it is easier to say things that other people find hard to hear, instead of walking on egg shells round each other or getting irritable about little things. Strong relationships increase commitment to the group and make your work more fun.

Exactly how you build up trust and strong relationships will vary from group to group, and from individual to individual. For some people knowing and talking about your shared values will be important. For others a vital component is knowing that everyone is reliable, or communicates clearly when they can't be. Having fun together is necessary for some people and talking about feelings and personal history is what others need.

Here are a few approaches different groups have taken:

Organise socials – especially ones that involve more than sitting around and talking together. Be aware of accessibility here – people who have less time available or less social energy for whatever reason could get squeezed out.

Value the group's activities as a way of spending time together as well as a way of getting things done. Look at practical tasks like banner making or running a stall as a chance to get to know each other and have fun. Meetings can also be a chance to have a nice time together. If the agendas aren't too packed people may be more relaxed and able to build stronger relationships.

Practice noticing what you appreciate about each other, and saying it out loud. When something happens which you don't appreciate, try to find a way to talk about it.

New people getting involved

In almost any long-term group new people will get involved at some stage. It isn't always easy for new people to feel part of an established group, especially once the original members have got into particular ways of relating to each other and doing the work.

Established group members will need to create space for new people to actively shape the group in order for them to really feel motivated and committed. Most would prefer to be an equal member of a collective rather than a foot soldier for someone else's vision.

At the same time, it is important for new members to understand the principles and aims that are core to the group. If these are explained clearly it helps the group to carry on functioning effectively for the purpose it was set up for.

A few tips for established group members:

- Be aware of unspoken messages which lead people to feel they are unwelcome. Many people find it hard to walk into a room full of people who already know each other - especially if they make in jokes, refer to past events without explaining themselves, and dismiss every new idea with 'we tried that and it didn't work'!
- Devote time to explaining the group's history and aims - and give the new person space to talk about themselves and why they have come along. Find out what new people's skills and interests are and explain how they can get involved.

- Be flexible. You might be sceptical of new ideas, and it could be patronising to others and damaging to yourself if you don't voice real concerns. However, if you push yourself to be open to new ways of doing things and taking on board new perspectives, it could open up all kinds of possibilities for the group.

And for the newbies:

- Be aware of all the work that went into getting the group where it is now. Your fresh eyes may give you loads of insight into what the group could do differently. At the same time, there may be reasons for how things are which aren't obvious to you. Balance helpful suggestions with an effort to understand the current set up.

Case study: helping people feel welcome

Warton Food Co-op has developed a way of involving new members which keeps them coming back. Their designated meeter-greeter introduces newcomers to everyone and answers any questions they have. The group have put together an attractive welcome pack with the aims, info about current activities, who does what, contact details and how to get involved. The group also include a 5 minute slot on the agenda to find out what people are interested in and why they've come.

Simon, the membership secretary explains a new way of collecting people's details: "It's really important that we get contact details from anyone interested in the group, so that we can follow up and stay in touch. We found that people don't like to put their details on a list, in case others see them. So we've come up with the idea of individual cards that people fill in and hand to me. I also keep a note of what activities people are interested in and what skills they have. Lots of people can't make it to meetings, so if something comes up that might interest them or we need a particular job doing we know just who we need to talk to."

Working sustainably and sharing the load

Many groups develop a pattern where one or two people with a lot of time and energy take on many of the core tasks of the group. This can get a lot done in the short term, but is rarely sustainable in the long run, both for the group and the individuals involved.

See our resources section for where to get support if you are an individual who is working unsustainably. Below we focus on ways the group can take responsibility for creating a sustainable work culture:

Sharing out the work and knowledge. Often someone who has been doing a job gets stuck with it because other people don't have information to take it on. It can be as simple as not having the login details for the email account or access to old posters that can be edited. New people in the group often don't have the overview to know what needs doing. They would like to take something on but don't know how to fit in.

It can also be hard to pass on jobs that you think are vital and need to be done well. Skillsharing and buddying up can help pass on skills and build that trust as well as making it easier for someone to take on something new.

Be realistic about the capacity of your group. Together work out how much time each individual can contribute and plan your activities on that basis. Find easy ways for people to get support if they have taken on more than they can do. For example, have a check-in at the beginning of meetings. Make it OK to be honest about where you are at. Maybe the action point can be re-allocated, or there is a quicker less involved way of doing it. Maybe the task to be dropped for now.

Support each other as people, and not just as workers for the group. Create time to socialise, and offer one to one chats, or whatever someone needs if things are getting too much.

Look after morale: celebrate your achievements, and show your appreciation of each other's work.

If you are someone who works very hard for the group, be careful not to contribute to a culture where other people feel guilty for

doing less. If you are feeling resentful take a step back and work out the best way of responding to the situation. Can you support others to be more involved? Can you explain how tired you are and ask the group to help problem-solve with you? Or do you just need to accept that you can't get as much done as you'd like with that group at that moment?

Try this:

Sit down together and make a list of all the jobs, identifying gaps and jobs that can be shared. Find out what people are good at/want to learn - and use that info to match up people and tasks.

Create 'How to' documents for specific jobs. It may take a bit of time to write down how to do a job, but once there are clear instructions it's easier for someone else to pick it up. Examples could include: a template for the monthly newsletter, a list of contact details and prices for local venues, a trouble-shooting guide to everything that regularly goes wrong with the office printer, or step-by-step instructions for setting up the group marquee.

If you find yourself doing too much, make a list and take it to a meeting. Collectively you can decide which of these are essential for the maintenance of the group and then share them out.

Conflict in your group

Conflict is an inevitable part of being in a group. Sometimes it flares up in visible ways, at other times people don't express their disagreements out loud, but they carry a lot of tension from what they are holding on the inside. Conflict can be painful; it can also open the door to changes that are helpful for the group in the long run. Here are a few thoughts on how to handle it:

Look for win-win solutions. Often we assume that our different needs are incompatible and we need to compete – but by taking a step back we may find ways forward that work for different people.

Listening carefully to what other people are saying, and expressing

yourself as clearly as you can helps with looking for win-win solutions. Tension and anger can make it harder to see from someone else's perspective, and even to see your own feelings clearly. Someone who's less involved may be able to help you say what you need to say and hear each other. That could be another person in the group or someone with mediation skills. In the longer term, practising clear communication will build up your conflict 'muscles' and help you navigate the next one.

Try to make sure everyone gets a fair hearing. It is common for someone's communication style to impact on the support they get from the group. For example, someone who finds it easy to explain their feelings may get their way more often than someone who struggles to articulate what is going on for them. Equally someone who quickly loses their temper would be dismissed in some groups as 'aggressive'. If you feel you aren't being heard, or if you don't feel safe around the person who are in conflict with, it's a good moment to ask for help!

Are there underlying reasons why conflict has flared up over a particular issue? Do you feel able to talk about them? If tempers are running high over what seems like a small issue, consider whether you are getting so heated because it fits a wider pattern - either in the particular relationships in your group, or in wider society. For example, are you wound up by doing the dishes three weeks in a row because you hate washing up - or is it because you were brought up female and feel you repeatedly end up with undervalued jobs?

Where possible, address issues early before too much bad feeling has built up - communication will be loads easier! Similarly, some groups agree a process for resolving conflicts before one arises - it can be hard to work out what is a fair process once trust has broken down.

Power dynamics

Groups set up because they have more power together - whether to stop open cast coal mining or support each other as single parents. At the same time there are always inequalities in the power different individuals hold within a group, and sometimes group members have power *over* others. This is no great surprise as most of us have grown up in a society

that is divided, unequal, exploitative and competitive – and finding new ways of behaving can be a life-long journey.

At times **power will be consciously given** to individuals. Some groups elect a committee which makes decisions on behalf of others. Often power will be delegated for a specific task, for example someone experienced in mass catering might be appointed head chef for a fundraiser.

Often individuals have more **power without the conscious consent** of the group. For example, someone who is very confident might get their way more often, whether because they insist on it or because other people defer to them. Or someone may have more influence because they are the only one who understands the finances of the group.

How much power someone has within a group can have many roots – for example what their childhood was like, what traumas they've had to deal with, relevant skills, social privileges in every day life or their position in the group. Whatever the reasons for someone's power, it comes with a responsibility to learn about how it impacts on others and to help each other share power more equally. Here are a few starting points for tackling unhealthy power dynamics in groups:

- Develop a culture of noticing and bringing up power imbalances. Address problems early on.
- Whether you are feeling dis-empowered and excluded or feel you have more influence than your fair share, you could start by talking to other people in a similar position. Realising that you are not alone in how you are feeling can give you strength and help you understand the underlying causes. Together it may be easier to raise the issues that bother you, and to suggest changes to how the group works.
- If you often end up shaping decisions more than your fair share, look for ways to re-direct some of your energy towards supporting others. For example, if you are able to communicate clearly, you could use that skill to support other people to express themselves, for example by asking open questions. Or if you already do that and still other people don't seem relaxed and engaged, try just giving them more space and

see what happens.

- Be ready to challenge people. How best to do this depends on lots of factors. If you are feeling hurt, vulnerable and angry you have the right to say so, regardless of whether someone else might get defensive, or dislike the way you say it. Showing the strength of your feelings may also help them see the impact of their behaviour.
- On the other hand, if you are feeling more detached, then be wary of challenging others in a way that could seem like point-scoring, or proving you are more right on. It might be easier for someone to hear your challenge if you are able to approach them with compassion, and acknowledge that you also make mistakes.

Keep working at it

Even once the group is up and running well, it is worth thinking again about all the questions above. Are you continuing to find new people to bring in fresh perspectives and energy? Are the structures and decision making methods you have still the best to enable you to work together effectively and democratically? Are you reviewing your strategy, addressing conflict, supporting each other to be sustainable, sharing power, maintaining accountability? Above all, are you getting things done and enjoying the process? The commitment to review how the group is working - and to do something about it - will keep you vibrant and effective long term.