

# STARTING A COMMUNITY GROUP

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# 1. INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW OF THIS HANDBOOK SERIES

This handbook series is designed to bring together much of the excellent information and advice that exists for community groups in Queensland and across Australia. It is aimed at small charitable community groups run primarily by volunteers, who have limited resources and time. The individual handbooks cover the following topics:

1. Starting a Community Group
2. Running an Effective Community Group
3. Working With People
4. Day to Day Operations
5. Creating Connections
6. Links & Resources

## 2. WHAT IS A COMMUNITY GROUP?

Small, grassroots community groups are exciting to work with and play an invaluable role in the community. These locally based not-for-profit groups are generally autonomous and run by volunteers. **They attract special and creative people who are passionate about their work, and there is a sense of friends coming together to achieve something they care about.** They do not have to be incorporated or take on a particular structure, and range from informal networks of a few like-minded people to large structured groups working on long-term projects.

### Some examples of community groups are:

- **Local community networks** (e.g. *Centenary Community Connections*)
- **Catchment and bushcare groups** (e.g. *Oxley Creek Catchment Association*)
- **Sporting associations** (e.g. *Annerley Football Club*)
- **Business groups** (e.g. *Dress for Success*)
- **Lions and rotary clubs** (e.g. *Moorooka Lions Club*)
- **Cultural groups** (e.g. *Islamic Women's Association*)
- **Craft and artistic groups** (e.g. *Beenleigh Quilters*)
- **Rural groups** (e.g. *QLD Rural, Regional and Remote Women's Network*)

Small community groups can be flexible and act quickly on issues with less of a bureaucratic approach, although they often work hand in hand with local and regional government bodies. **They connect and engage citizens at a local level, providing community input and strategic advice, contributing their skills, experience and influence in the care of community assets and resources.** However these groups are traditionally ignored or it is assumed the same concepts of effectiveness and viability apply to these groups as to large non-profit organisations.



## 3. ARE COMMUNITY GROUPS VALUABLE FOR AUSTRALIA?

Small community groups in Australia are more prolific and valuable than is generally known. **In 2001, Australia had 700,000 community organisations, out of which only 35,000 had paid staff.** Of the incorporated organisations in Queensland, 80% have less than \$50,000 funding per year and fewer than 100 members. **The value of volunteering in the not-for-profit sector is often overlooked, even though it has been estimated to provide more than \$290 billion per year to the Australian economy.**

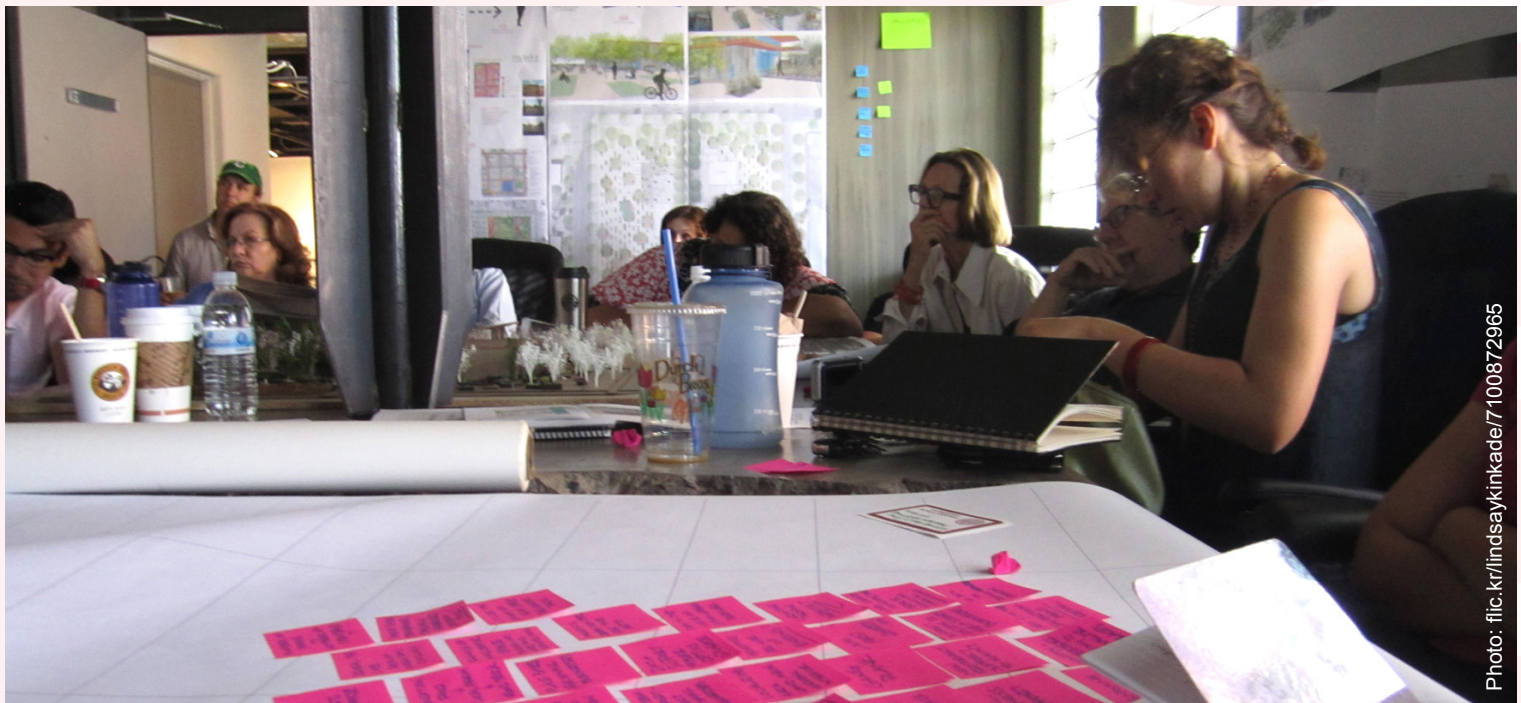


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## 4. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY GROUPS?

**Autonomous, volunteer run groups fill an essential role in the community that cannot be replaced by large non-profits or government groups. They allow people to have a voice on topics of importance to them, and to be able to work together to make a positive impact in their local area.** Members can network and get to know others with similar priorities and passions, as well as learning new skills and gaining personal fulfilment.

Community groups work across a very broad range of issues and consequently take many different approaches to their work. Some groups have a community-building and problem-solving role where people come together to address issues that affect their communities. Other groups have a campaigning or advocacy role, challenging the government or the market and trying to change or mobilise public opinion. And some groups have a defensive role, offering and maintaining a range of alternative perspectives and approaches to the mainstream culture.

## 5. SHOULD I START MY OWN COMMUNITY GROUP?

If you are passionate about an issue in your local area or more broadly, one way to make a difference is to gather like-minded people into a community group. **Before embarking on this path, however, you should consider a few key points.**

- **Who else is already working on this issue or in this region?** Explore what they are doing and whether you can contribute to their efforts instead.
- **Is there community support for your cause?** Have others expressed an interest in joining you? What other stakeholders might be able to add value to your group? Why would people come to the group and why will they stay?
- **Do you have the personal capacity and time to dedicate to this project?** What are your motives for forming a group, and why is the issue so important to you?

## 6. HOW DO I START SETTING UP A COMMUNITY GROUP?

If you have decided that there is a need, the community support and your own personal capacity to start a community group, you can begin working on the following steps:

- **Get others involved straight away and form a work group.** You can invite local residents, experts, professionals and members of other similar groups. You will ideally need at least three committed people to start a new group.
- **Together, sit down to define who you are and what you do.** Choose a name for your group! What is the purpose of your group, the issue you want to address and some key actions you want to achieve? How is the issue currently being addressed, who else is active in this area and do they pose opportunities or constraints? Is it a short or long term project and how will you know you've been successful? Learn from others groups who are doing similar things: go and talk to them, form networks and take note of the things they have done well and the issues they have faced.
- **Determine how you will build community support and involve other people.** What would motivate someone to get involved with your group, what would be the benefits to them of being involved and who do you want to target? Will your group be exclusive or inclusive? How will you recruit and retain people in your group (see *Handbook 3*) and what are the barriers to their involvement?
- **Negotiate your ways of working.** Who will lead: one person or a shared leadership team? How will you work together effectively, when and where will you meet, how will you make decisions? Discuss your group culture and how this may influence your ways of working. Even at the beginning, discuss succession planning and how you can ensure one person doesn't take on all the work and burn out.
- **Start to plan some key actions.** What do you want to achieve, what will this look like in practice, who will take on the actions and how will you evaluate it? There is more information on strategic planning in *Handbook 4*. Try to dream big but start small, and plan some tangible, achievable goals for the near future, with clear timeframes.
- **Determine the resources (volunteers, finances, equipment, etc.) you will need and how you can begin to access these resources.** What networks can you use?
- **Don't formalise too quickly but instead have an initial focus on actions that will lead to success.** Then, after some time your group will need to consider its own long-term structure, as well as producing role descriptions for volunteers, determining whether or not to become incorporated, drawing up policies and procedures, etc.
- See *Handbook 6* for links to more detailed resources on starting a community group.

## 7. WHAT ARE THE CURRENT TRENDS & ISSUES FACED BY COMMUNITY GROUPS?

Small community groups face a changing environment for volunteer-run organisations, including some of the following trends:

- **Volunteers now have higher expectations of their role and the work they are involved in;** they are clear about what they would like to gain as well as contribute to a program.
- **There is greater recognition of volunteers** and the power of volunteering.
- **Community services are increasingly in demand** and many groups are in need of more volunteers, as well as resources to manage them.
- **Government priorities are changing and there is an overall decline in the amount of funding available.** Funding bodies are focusing on collaboration, partnerships, auspicing and mergers, with a high expectation of efficiency and innovation in potential projects. Small groups may need to link to larger groups or lead agencies to access funding.
- **The demographics of volunteering are changing.** The proportion of people who volunteer in Australia has grown from 24 per cent in 1995 to 36 per cent in 2010. Ad hoc and episodic volunteer roles are increasingly desirable, with a large demand for virtual, corporate, short term and event volunteering. There is a growing diversity of volunteers by age, gender and ethnicity. People aged 45 to 54 years reported the highest rate of volunteering (44%). Younger age groups most commonly volunteer for groups related to sport and recreation. Volunteering for parenting groups is relatively common in the 25-34 and 35-44 year old groups while volunteering for welfare and community type groups is common in the older age groups.
- **There is a greater expectation on the part of funding bodies, clients and stakeholders that community groups should assure the quality of their products and services,** and that risks should be appropriately acknowledged and managed.





