

A I F I R I A

Alliance of Folkestone Residents Associations

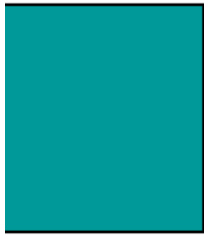
Community Voice

“ALONE, WE
CAN DO SO
LITTLE;
TOGETHER,
WE CAN DO
SO MUCH”

HELEN KELLER

A practical guide
for community groups





AFRA

Alliance of Folkestone Residents Associations

The CV Guide A practical guide to Community Voice for Residents Associations, voluntary organisations and Civic Society groups

Introduction

This short “**CV guide**” is intended to help and support community activists and volunteers involved in developing community voice - working as representatives of community groups in and around the Folkestone and Hythe District. This part provides a general overview to start with; there is a set of extra sections with practical advice and sample documents which can be printed and edited freely. We hope the guide will be useful to groups old and new: we’re always happy to offer advice or support.

The guide has been compiled by **AFRA**: the Alliance of Folkestone Residents Community Groups. There is no requirement to follow the approach described in this guide – your group is for you and your members and your particular purpose. Some bits of information may be useful, others less so.

AFRA was set up in 2020 so Residents Associations could work together and learn from each other. We now have a wider membership including partners, such as the New Folkestone Society. If you feel you would like to link up with AFRA there are some simple criteria you would need to meet - basically this involves signing up to our values of accountability and transparency.

AFRA can help by giving support when your group is just getting started or if you want advice at any time. We can also help by finding a place to meet and putting you in touch with similar groups.

AFRA is a friendly and informal network group which meets up quarterly and has an online website and Facebook presence - we welcome new members joining us.

- Email: info@afra.network
- Website: www.afra.network
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/afrafb>

What is a Community Group?

We’re using the phrase Community Group here to refer to several different types of organisation with a working definition of a group of people with common purpose for common good. Some of the more common forms of Community Group include:

- Residents Associations – for people who live in the same area, whether they are council tenants, owner-occupiers, leaseholders or private tenants. The membership can be defined by geographical boundaries or by other factors.
- Civic Societies– for people who have a strong interest in issues across the wider community, which might include, for example, heritage, rights issues, or arts activity.
- Forum groups – which act as sounding boards on a particular issue, to support a campaign or to develop ideas. Examples might include issues around public transport or other public services.

What all have in common is a belief that community action matters: we shouldn’t leave all the decision making and work to elected representatives or expect “them” to deal with everything.

What makes it work?

Community Groups carry out a range of activities from resolving local neighbourhood problems to organising street parties, from promoting recycling projects to campaigning for youth facilities.

The common characteristics of Community Groups are usually:

- To represent shared views and concerns.
- To provide a forum for people to consider matters of local concern and importance.
- To encourage an inclusive, more equal society and promote a sense of community spirit.
- To have a consultative role when there are proposals to make changes in your area.

These are many reasons why people may want to get involved; some may just want to get to know their neighbours or make new friends. In most cases, Community Groups are made up of people who come together to address a shared interest or a shared concern. By working together, they show a desire for a better sense of community in the area.

In our experience, local authority officers and elected members very much welcome community voice. For most key decisions, consultation is an essential requirement – so community groups can be very helpful to make democracy work well.

What makes a good group is a team which is clearly committed to **enjoyment and engagement**. When people have a good experience as a member and they feel involved without being pressured, everyone enjoys working together and you avoid the trap of turning the group into a friendship clique.

“Becoming involved in a Community Group gave us the opportunity to discuss important issues and have an influence in the decision-making process. We make a difference in Folkestone.”

Golden rules

From experience, there are five golden rules to keeping a community group healthy and happy (most of the time!) and five common problems – the opposite of each other.

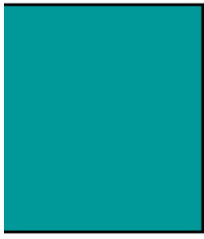
1. **Remember what the group is for**
2. **Have clear rules and stick to them**
3. **Communicate and update every month**
4. **Share and explain committee decisions**
5. **Make sure the use of money is an open book**

Common risks or problems

1. **Failing to engage members, becoming a clique**
2. **Failing to follow the rule book, ignoring basic law, making it up as you go along**
3. **Failing to let people know the latest news**
4. **Failing to work in a transparent way**
5. **Failing to have an open approach to obtaining and using group funds**

That’s basically it – the very simple CV guide! You can find additional detail if you browse the following sections and samples of work from groups we have worked with.

- **Getting going** **starting up; getting organised; getting recognised;**
- **Getting it together** **enjoyment and engagement; meetings**
- **Getting a perspective** **review, report, refine**
- **Getting it right** **a little legal stuff**



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Getting going

This section sets out some basic working tips and hints for Community Groups.

#1 Getting started

Here are some pointers if you are wondering how to get started: the answer is really just to have a go!

- Plan: work out what you want to achieve, and a simple timeline of work needed to get going
- Ask: get advice from other groups (or AFRA!) about how they got going
- Inform: let people know about your plans and ideas and invite them to join you.
- Talk: chat to people you know and find out how much interest there is out there.
- Visit: call in community centres, places where people might be interested to share ideas
- Start: arrange a meeting or a simple social event to start off with

It's always good to invite Ward Councillors and other local organisations to be there at the start

#2 Getting organised

The Committee

The committee is simply a group chosen by members to do the work that keeps the group running well. Committee members are responsible for organising the work of the group, arranging meetings for members and being accountable to members, with an annual AGM to elect the main officers.

The committee can and will sometimes make decisions on behalf of the group, when not all members are present, but these decisions *must always be reported back* to all members.

The committee should be representative of the membership, e.g. including men, women, old, young, black, white, disabled.

#3 Getting busy - key roles and what is involved

The main committee or working group will usually have at least 4 officers, typically Chair, Vice Chair (Deputy), Secretary and Treasurer. A simple outline for each of these roles is set out below.

Chair

The Chair is the group's key representative and the guide for the Community Group to achieve its aims and conducts the meetings. A good Chair ensures there is a fair discussion of issues and ensures all views are heard and considered, rather than using the role to share their own views!

The Chair must ensure that all members are properly represented.

The Chair should:

- Be aware of all activities carried out by the group and be familiar with the Constitution.
- Encourage officers to play an active role, sharing collective responsibility on the committee.
- Provide an agenda with clear content and aims for all meetings (with the help of the Secretary).
- Ensure that each item on the Agenda is discussed and a decision made.
- Manage meetings so everyone has the chance to contribute in a positive atmosphere.
- Allow one person to speak and be heard at a time and discourage private conversations.

Vice Chair

The Vice Chair helps the Chair carry out their role and will take over the work of the Chair if he/she cannot attend a meeting or is ill or on holiday.

Secretary

The Secretary is often the glue that holds the group together... the communication hub!

Their job usually involves...

- Letting people know about the next meeting, sending out advance notice and an agenda
- Writing and receiving letters on behalf of the group and keeping members informed about these.
- Keeping an up to date record of membership.
- Taking Minutes – simply a brief record of the meeting which is easy to read and understand.

The Secretary will

- send out information to members, so that everyone knows what is going on
- often be the first point of contact for committee members and residents.
- ensure that a proper record is kept of all meetings
- ensure all decisions are recorded and communicated to members.
- take minutes at meetings, e.g. a brief written record of the discussion and decisions made.
- send out minutes, as soon as possible, after each meeting and keep copies for future reference.
- help the Chair with setting the agenda.

Treasurer

The Treasurer is the money person, keeping the group in good working condition.

The Treasurer

- makes sure any money belonging to the group is properly managed, recorded and accounted.
- sees that money is paid in and bills are paid promptly with the authorisation of the Committee
- ensures the Committee does not spend money it does not have
- keeps all Committee members aware of the state of the Community Group finances.
- arranges for the accounts to be audited yearly by someone who is qualified and independent.
- Arranges for a bank or building society account to be opened and managed for the group.

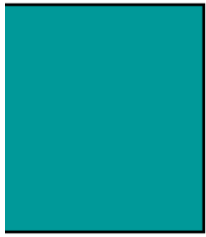
Sometimes people are reluctant to volunteer for the role of Treasurer because they see it as a difficult job. It is actually quite simple if you are methodical and keep good records of all financial transactions. Simple common-sense arrangements will help keep the group's money affairs in order.

1. Keep a record of all money raised, received and spent.
2. Prepare a regular statement of accounts for the committee and members.=
3. Bank accounts should ideally have three signatories listed on the mandate.
4. Keep petty cash and a petty cash book for day-to-day expenditure.

#3 Getting recognised

Part of the work involves building recognition; being a brand in a small way, that people can trust AFRA can offer advice on publicity, social media and ways of getting your name known in a good way. In order to be recognised by AFRA, a group should:

- Have a Constitution with a clear equal opportunities statement approved by AFRA.
(A model Constitution is included as a starting point to help you work out one of your own)
- Have a clear remit or purpose set out in the Constitution
- Have a membership which ultimately controls the direction of the group
- Aim to improve the quality of life for everyone in the group and for others in the community.
- Have officers who are elected by the members annually.
- Set up a community bank account to handle any money for the group



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Getting it together

Enjoyment and Engagement are key

#1 Meetings matter

Keeping in touch with your members is vital in order to keep the group in a healthy condition. They should be held on a regular basis, whether it is monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly. Some groups hold separate meetings just for the Committee, as well as general meetings for all members. Others prefer to hold all their meetings as open meetings for anyone to attend.

It is important to publicise meetings so that everyone can attend and have their say. Meetings are vital for exchanging information, discussing and sharing ideas and making decisions. Everyone should know what you want to achieve as a group, the challenge is to get and keep people involved. The success of a meeting depends on a basic recipe of **enjoyment and engagement**:

- Having a clear agenda.
- Good Chairing.
- Deciding the way forward with action from each meeting.
- Making meetings interesting and **enjoyable** and comfortable for everyone to feel **engaged**.

You don't want the committee to be a clique of activists or allow it to be a 'one-man-band' with a strong, persuasive leading personality. *Share the work, share the credit and share the news.*

#2 Getting the record straight

The minutes or notes for a meeting should always:

- State the name of your group and the date, time and place of the meeting.
- Include a list of people present and those who have sent apologies.
- Be set out in the same order as the agenda.
- Contain a brief description of the key points of discussion and any decisions made.
- State who will carry out any decisions or actions – showing that person's initials.
- Give the date, time and place of the next meeting.

Minutes should not be a gossip diary with details of individuals or matters discussed in confidence. *Minutes do not have to record* verbatim discussion, but noting key points is very useful for reference. *The record should show clearly* any decisions made.

It helps to make meetings informal but focused. Remember to let everyone introduce themselves and encourage everyone to take part. It takes time and practice to get it right and make things run smoothly.

If people do not attend meetings, it doesn't mean they are not interested. Instead of being discouraged, try and find out why people don't attend, e.g. they can't find a babysitter or haven't been able to read or understand your leaflet/agenda. Perhaps they just don't want to come out at night, in which case varying the times of your meetings might help.

#3 Have fun: enjoyment matters too...

Try to make sure your Community Group is enjoyable.

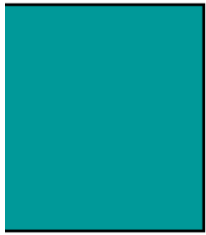
Being a community leader (which is what this is all about) in any group can be hard work but it is possible to get a lot of satisfaction from the social side of working together with people.

Avoid meetings becoming a place where people just come along to have a moan. Having simple refreshments or treats - a break halfway through meetings creates a friendly atmosphere for people to chat and get to know each other – and can also offer a breathing space sometimes!

Social events really help but remember that a lot of people are already busy and already have a friendship group: friendship is not the core purpose but being friendly encourages people to stay. No one stays very long if they feel uncomfortable and never have a good time.

Activities which can help groups to gel by working together and getting to know each other a bit better.... (we can share how some of these activities can be organised, from experience)

- *Market stalls at community events*
- *Quiz sessions*
- *Trails for family interest*
- *Communal meals: bring and share*
- *Marking an occasion: (any excuse will do!)*
- *Street Party or Garden Party*
- *Local history walks and talks*
- *Guest speakers (with a sense of humour, preferably)*
- *Collaborative arts projects*
- *'Zine publications to mark milestones in the life of the group*
- *Exhibitions to tell the story of the group and its work*
- *A night at the movies*
- *Outings on the bus*



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Getting a perspective

Records, Reviews, Reports – and remembering why you are there

#1 Define Your Aims and do your homework

If your group was set up because of key issues or problems, it can be a good idea to run surveys of your members and other interested parties to find out how they see priorities and progress.

You can mix methods, using online software (which is very easy to manage) and personal interview or paper responses. What matters is that you are showing your interest in their views.

You will need to set out longer-term aims for the group, but it's good to remember to work on some short-term issues (quick wins), that can also be addressed. This helps people see the point of staying involved. Regular successes, however small, help to keep people involved and interested.

Usually the purpose of the group is usually best set out in a simple, clear document. Less formally, you could call it a Rulebook – but there are still rules which help the group to work well.

More formally, you may call it a Constitution which suggests a group which is committed to the same values and principles which would be used by a charity, a public service group or similar body.

#2 Taking stock: look back, review and celebrate progress regularly

If you have clear goals, then you can measure progress simply by putting together a simple list of where you started and where you have got to.

For example, in 2019 there were 60 members and in 2024 there are 120 – you have succeeded in growing the group. The next question is how many members are actively interested or involved.

Some of the questions to ask and then nail down a simple statement in each case include:

1. What are we trying to achieve?
2. What are we doing to get there?
3. What have we done in the past 6 months?
4. When did we last send out a newsletter/leaflet?
5. How many members come to our meetings?
6. Do people say anything when they come to our meetings?
7. Do members seem to enjoy the meetings?
8. Are there more or fewer people involved now compared with a year ago?

Asking questions like this can help identify what your problems and successes are. Always keep in mind there are more important things than how many attend your meetings.

While you may want people to attend your meetings, talking to people, listening to what they have to say, representing them and working towards changing things for the better is just as important as getting them to attend meetings.

#3 Developing and maintaining a healthy Constitution

Your group committee is designed to represent the members, with a range of needs and views.

A written Constitution, covering the aims and rules of your group helps everyone who is a member to understand how it works, who does what and how they can contribute.

Once you have a constitution, you need to know what it says and to follow the guidance it provides!

The main ingredients for a constitution are usually:

Section	Purpose
Aims.	Sets out what the group is trying to achieve
Membership.	Defines who can join the group
Subscriptions (if appropriate).	Explains how membership fees are set
Conduct of business.	Describes how meetings should be run
Committee meetings.	Information on working groups and how they operate
General meetings (including Annual General Meeting and special meetings).	The rules for main membership meetings
Quorum (the minimum number of people needed for a meeting to go ahead and make any decisions
Notice of meetings.	How and when information should be sent round
Sub committees (if appropriate).	A listing of key working groups
Duties of officers.	The role and jobs of key people
Alterations to the Constitution.	How rules can be changed

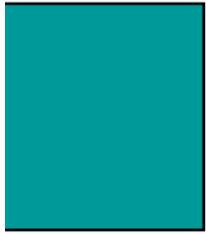
In order for AFRA to formally recognise your Community Group or offer financial support, your Constitution will need to be approved.

Recognition means that we can offer support and advice, including some limited resources to help with meeting spaces, refreshments, printing or other costs to help groups - particularly in the early days.

What we are aiming to do is to encourage community activism and support best practice by learning from each other.

The essential requirement is to ensure that your group operates democratically and inclusively and represents the views and interests of members.

We can provide advice and several constitution models or examples which you can adapt for your Community Group.



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Getting it right

A little bit of legal

For proper legal advice, always talk with a legal professional, of course.

This note highlights some of the most important areas where you really do need to understand the core principles and bear these in mind, so that your reputation and your good work are kept in good condition!

This really is a very brief summary of issues you need to consider further – and in many cases seek advice or training for your group’s core committee or leadership team.

1. Basic law

- a. You have a general responsibility to set a good example and to behave well – even if you are dealing with difficult people sometimes. As a starting point, try not to break the law!
- b. It’s easy to get carried away with a campaign and forget that you do not have any greater authority than other citizens: at least be aware of the risks and take advice.
- c. For example
 - i. Posting notices on lampposts or public spaces is often an offence: be aware
 - ii. Criticising people on social media causes offence - and can be actionable
 - iii. Using public spaces generally needs consent from the owner or local authority

2. Safeguarding

- a. Many people think of safeguarding in dealing with children, but it involves the responsibility to consider any vulnerable person who might be adversely affected or at risk
- b. Practical steps include the need to:
 - i. Ensure that basic training and policies are in place
 - ii. Designate a responsible person
 - iii. Plan events and activities to avoid situations which create unnecessary risk

3. Health and Safety

- a. The basic approach to health and safety is simple: avoid unnecessary risk.
- b. That means, for example...
 - i. Planning events to minimise risks – hot water, trip hazards and so on
 - ii. Being aware of conditions for hiring or using premises, such as fire safety
 - iii. Being aware of food hygiene regulation when providing catering

iv.

4. Information management

- a. Information is crucial: regular newsletters, social media and meetings all help to keep people involved. All bring challenges - and the need to get information management right.
- b. It's very likely that a group that develops in number and extends activity will need to handle private contact details and other information which should be kept confidential
- c. That means knowing the basics about data protection, for example..
 - i. Registering with the Information Commissioners Office where necessary
 - ii. Not sharing email addresses with open CC messages
 - iii. Ensuring members are told how they can opt out of group mailings

5. Financial management

- a. The rule of thumb here is simple: be transparent and open with money to avoid suspicion or ill-feeling. You have a responsibility to manage money well and to remember it does not belong to you but to your members. It is important to avoid **conflict of interest**.
- b. Conflict of interest is where you have an actual or perceived personal gain from the use of money or opportunity: you should steer clear of
 - i. Using group funds for anything other than the agreed priorities
 - ii. Promoting activities which you have a personal or professional vested interest in
 - iii. Applying for grants or funding to support projects outside the group remit
- c. Accounting is important – and helps to maintain trust and confidence, which involves:
 - i. Telling your members regularly about balances, monies spent and received
 - ii. Having an independent examiner check your end of year accounts
 1. This must be someone with no direct connections to the group itself
 2. For a group with turnover above £5000, a paid auditor may be advisable

6. Further information and advice:

Don't be daunted by the responsibilities! The work you are doing is really valuable and will be appreciated. Many generations and many different groups have done an amazing job and found ways of keeping it all manageable.

There is always help and support available to you. Here are a few starting points

- Basic legal advice: Contact AFRA or your local Councillors for a starting point
- Safeguarding: thirtyone: eight is a valuable resource website
<https://thirtyoneeight.org/help-and-resources/safeguarding-helpline/>
- Health and Safety: The Health and Safety Executive are very helpful
<http://www.hse.gov.uk>
- Information management: The Information Commissioners Office is the key contact
<https://ico.org.uk>
- Finance and general advice: Brighton **Resource Centre** website is extremely good
<https://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/information-category/managing-money/>

Model Constitution

(bullet points in red are optional/should be tailored to the group's focus)

In the following version, feel free to edit and replace 'Community Group' with the name and type of your organisation with something which is more relevant; the general principles should work for most groups.

Name

The Community Group is known as:

The area covered by the Community Group is:

Aims

The aims of the Community Group are to:

- **Work towards our core goal of...**
- Represent the interests of all our members.
- Ensure that members are consulted regularly and encouraged to engage with our activity.
- Promote community, social, educational and other activities of value to our members
- Develop facilities and resources to support our members.
- Help build a good relationship between our members and other partner organisations.
- Encourage inclusion by encouraging mutual respect and tolerance and opposing racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and harassment.

Membership

Membership is open to all people who support our stated aims.

- **Members must be resident in the area defined as follows (postcodes, street or other reference)**

The Community Group's Committee may suspend the membership of any member whose conduct damages the reputation of the group. This can be done at special meetings.

Subscriptions (only if appropriate)

- **Subscriptions will be set at the Annual General Meeting.**

Meetings and the management of business

The business of the Community Group will be conducted by the Committee.

The Committee will be elected at the first full meeting of the Community Group and at each Annual General Meeting. Candidates must be proposed and seconded by members of the Community Group and may be elected on a straight majority of members present at the meeting.

The Committee will be made up of the following members;

- Chair
- Vice Chair
- Secretary
- Treasurer
- And at least two other members

The election, or removal, of officers or committee members, may only be carried out by an Annual General Meeting of the Community Group. The committee may temporarily fill any vacancy arising among the officers of the Community Group from its other members until the next Annual General Meeting of members, at which time an election shall take place.

No committee meeting shall take place without a quorum – a minimum required number of three people, including at least one member from the office of Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary or Treasurer.

The Committee shall arrange a minimum of four open meetings per year for the members of the Community Group, to discuss issues affecting the Community Group.

Annual General Meeting

The Committee shall call an Annual General Meeting of the Community Group so that members can hear the Committee's report on the year's activities, listen to the Treasurer's report on how their money was used and elect a new Committee.

Notice of the meeting will be sent to all members and the meeting will be open to non-members who are eligible for membership.

- **Non members will not have voting rights, but may speak at the Annual General Meeting.**

Special meetings

Special meetings to discuss emergency matters directly affecting the Community Group or its interests may be arranged at the request of at least three committee members or by a written request signed by at least a quarter of the membership of the Community Group.

All meetings will be arranged by the committee which will ensure that all members are notified of meeting arrangements. Members shall be provided with at least 14 days notice of the date, time, venue and agenda of the meeting. The meetings are open to all members of the group.

Sub committees

The Committee may appoint sub committees to carry out the activities of the Community Group.

Any sub committee formed to look at a particular project or problem will keep accounts of their spending and a record of their meetings and remain accountable to the Committee.

Duties of officers

The officers will organise the work of the Community Group. The Chair shall conduct the meetings of the Community Group. The Vice Chair shall carry out the duties of the Chair, in his/her absence.

- **The Treasurer will open a bank account in the Community Group's name. Cheques should be signed by the Treasurer and at least one other committee member. The Treasurer will keep a proper account of the money being received and spent by the Community Group and at least once a year will give the accounts to an auditor to be checked.**

The Secretary will let members know about meetings, keep minutes of the Community Group's meetings and maintain a list of the Community Group's members.

Minutes shall be made available to any member, on request.

Finance

All money granted to, or raised by, the Community Group shall be used for the benefit of the Community Group's members only in line with the aims and objectives set out in the Constitution.

All expenditure must receive prior agreement from the Committee. Expenditure, other than petty cash, should be formally approved by the Committee. A vote must be taken and the result minuted.

Alterations to the Constitution

Any changes to the Constitution must be discussed at an open meeting. Members will be given at least 14 days' notice of the date, time, venue and content of the meeting. Any change must be approved by at least two thirds of the members present and voting at the meeting.

Dissolution

The Committee, or if a committee no longer exists, a majority of remaining members of the Community Group, can propose that the Community Group should be dissolved.

They must give at least 14 days' notice to all members of the date, time and venue of the meeting and the fact that this matter will be discussed. For the sole purpose of dissolution, a quorum need not apply; the Community Group may be dissolved by a two-thirds majority of those present.

Once the Community Group has satisfied its liabilities, assets remaining in the Community Group's funds shall be used for purposes of benefit to the community, as the meeting shall decide.

Sample leaflet for group meetings:

You'll need to edit the content, add in some colour and some great visual material to improve appeal and impact!

Public Meeting

From (start time to finish time)
on (date)
at: (venue)

(for example)

Buses, Noise and Parking!

**Would you like to help us
make a difference?**

We are planning to set up a Community Group
to influence local decision making
and help make positive changes

Come along, meet some like-minded people
and discuss how we can make a difference together!

See you there!

For further information contact
(name and number/address)

We can offer advice on simple design tools, communications and related resources.