

Project Planning

Project planning consists of a set of simple practices and principles that your group can use to ensure your project is delivered smoothly and effectively to get maximum benefit for the community you serve. The project planning process begins long before your project starts and continues after your project has ended, helping you to plan your project properly and evaluate it effectively once it has finished.

Planning a community project properly is vital. Without proper planning, monitoring and evaluation your project is at risk of failure. If your project does not achieve its required aims and objectives, you may risk having money ‘clawed back’ by your funders. If your projects are unsuccessful this will also impact on the reputation of your group and ultimately cause your community to lose interest in your activities.

What is a project?

A project is any activity that has a clearly identified set of aims and objectives, an agreed method of achieving these and a date for completion

Undertaking a community project can be split into four distinctive phases:

1. Defining – What need will the project meet? – What will it do?
2. Planning – How will it be done?
3. Delivery – Doing it
4. Exit, evaluation and review – How well did it meet the need?

1. Defining: what and why?

Get people together to share views and ideas. Try to speak to people about the problem or project idea and see if they want to do something about it.

Consultation – Make sure your community wants it!

For any project to succeed and make a difference it needs to be needed or wanted. If it isn't, people will not get involved. You may be able to use previous data and consultations that have been done in your area to find out what people's issues are and what they want to see happen in your community. However, you may need to conduct additional research or consultation with your community to confirm the need.

The golden rules are:

- Make sure your project is what your community wants
- Make sure you can evidence this fact

Establish clearly defined aims and objectives

You need to set out:

- Exactly what your project will achieve
- How it will achieve it

These are the key questions that any potential funders will want to know. You need to have



clearly identified and written down project aims and objectives that you will work towards and measure the success of your project against.

Your objectives should be SMART:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Time related

2. Planning

Write a project brief

A project brief is a short description of your project idea and ideally should be no longer than two sides of A4. This should include:

A short background: Briefly describing where the idea for your project came from and how it has been developed. Make sure that you include any research or consultation that proves a need for your project idea in your community.

A short description of what you intend to do: This needs to be brief and to the point and tell the reader in just a few sentences what the project is and how you will do it 'in a nutshell'.

Aims & objectives: Your main project aims and objectives.

Partner organisations: You need to identify any partner organisations you intend to work with on the project. Partner organisations can include organisations that you contract to undertake work on the project or advisory bodies as well as other local groups and organisations that are assisting with the project.

Funding / budget: Draft costings for the project that are itemised where possible, and state where you intend to get the money from: i.e. own funds, grant funding, sponsorship etc. It is important to recognise that both your project budget and where you get the money from may change as you progress further through your project planning.

Timeline: Outline a rough timeline for your project, with key milestones for you to work towards.

Exit Strategy: Many funders will require you to have an appropriate exit strategy to ensure that their investment has a longer-term benefit than just the lifetime of your project. Your exit strategy may be simple, such as signposting your participants to similar activities or it could be complex, like putting systems in place to generate income so that your project carries on into the future without the need for grant funding.

Ensure your group is 'fit for purpose'

Ensuring your group is 'fit for purpose' basically means making sure that you have all the relevant policies, procedures, and training to deliver your project. This could range from ensuring that all your committee is DBS checked and safeguarding-trained to whether you have employer's liability insurance if your project is employing staff. Please see our 'Policies and Procedures' fact sheet for more detailed information.



Publicity and promotion

Promoting your project should be an on-going part of project planning to maximise benefit. A great time to start your first wave of publicity is when you receive the good news that your project has been awarded funding. You should follow this up with media opportunities during and on completion of your project.

Getting funded

You need to give yourself adequate time in the planning process to get all the funding in place that you need to deliver your project. It can take up to six months (often much longer for larger grant applications) for funding to be granted and in place, and so you will need to be patient. Make sure that the funding you are applying for is right for your project as you will only cause yourself future difficulties if you try and change your project to fit the funder's criteria. For more information please see our factsheets 'Fit for Funding' and 'Searching for Funding'.

Plan for contingencies

Not everything will go to plan! Identify as many possible things that can go wrong as you can and then look at different contingencies and 'plan Bs' you could use to get things back on track. It sounds pessimistic and negative, but this is a really useful exercise because if things do not go to plan when you are delivering your project you do not want to be left puzzled as to what to do next.

3. Delivering your project

Now that you have successfully planned out your project and have everything in place, including the necessary funding, you are ready to begin delivering your project. The delivery phase is where it will all happen. This is what the public will see of the project and what will ultimately impact on the reputation of your group. Many people do not realise the planning that goes into delivering a community project, but it is vital that you stick to your plans throughout the delivery phase unless there is a drastic need to change something.

Keep a track of your budget!

Make sure that elements of your project are not coming in over-budget. If this is unavoidable you need to consult with your funders at the earliest possible opportunity to see if you can amend your project budget by compensating for the elements that have come in over-budget with money from elements of the project that have come in under-budget. In general, funders will not increase the amount of money they have originally awarded you.

Monitoring

For longer term projects, funders will probably ask you for periodic monitoring / progress reports based on questions that will be linked to the 'outputs' and 'outcomes' you stated you would achieve in your funding application. It's important to start the monitoring process at the very beginning of the project so you can easily collect data on the numbers of users and the numbers of services provided, as well as anecdotal evidence of the difference you have made. For more information, see our 'Monitoring and Evaluation' factsheet.

Report back your progress

You need to regularly report back on progress to your full Committee and your wider community or membership. Your committee is ultimately accountable for the success or failure



of your project, and any associated funding contracts, and therefore need to be kept constantly the loop.

Don't be afraid to make changes if things are not working!

If you are monitoring the delivery of your project closely then you will be able to identify any problems early on and make appropriate changes before any damage is done. However, please note that for any major changes to the delivery of your project you should seek the agreement of your funders first.

4. After your project has finished

Activate your exit strategy

Through your project planning you will have identified an appropriate exit strategy which will outline how the benefits of your project will be carried on after your project has come to an end. Undoubtedly, you want your project to deliver as much benefit as possible and so you need to make sure you follow up on this strategy.

Evaluate your project

Conducting a proper evaluation of your project once it has finished is just as important as the process of planning your project. You need to know ultimately whether your project has been a success and has achieved the desired outcomes. Again, your funders will require you to evaluate your project and may even do their own evaluation to ensure they have achieved value for money with their grant. You can use what you have learnt from doing the project and what has been achieved to perhaps adapt the project for the future or to make new plans for a different project. For more information see our 'Monitoring and Evaluation' information sheet.

Publicise your successes

Finally, don't forget to sing your own praises. If your project has been a success and made a real difference to your community - let people know about it! Organise a photo opportunity with the local newspaper, hold a celebration event or do a positive write up in your local community newsletter. Involve the project participants or beneficiaries, get quotes from them for the paper and allow them to do interviews!

Getting further support

Northumberland Community Voluntary Action (Northumberland CVA) has access to a wide range of resources to help with project planning and can offer one to one advice and support. For more information, advice and support email enquire@northumberlandcva.org.uk or call 01670 858688.