
Factsheet:

SCOTTISH
MUSEUMS
COUNCIL



Developing a Membership Scheme

What Are Members For?

A recent report by the Charities Commission reveals that almost half the charities in England and Wales have a membership base. It also reports that the majority of cases it handles relating to governance issues come from the same sector. Although statistics are not available, the situation is unlikely to be much different in Scotland. It underlines the point that as well as being a useful source of annual income members (unlike Friends) have rights and responsibilities which should be outlined in the organisation's constitution.

Although members are not involved in the day-to-day running of the organisation they are an important democratic counterweight to the Management Committee (MC) or Trustees whose decisions they can scrutinise through resolutions raised at AGMs or specially convened general meetings. On the positive side, many charities and voluntary organisations see advantages in having an active and well-informed membership:

- they help to demonstrate that the organisation is transparent and accountable
- they raise issues that might not otherwise appear on the MC's agenda
- they provide both direct (through annual subscriptions) and indirect (through personal networks) fundraising opportunities
- they are a source of new recruits to the MC.

Defining the Benefits and Duties of Membership

There can be different categories of members, but in general members have similar rights under the organisation's constitution. No changes can be made to the constitution without the approval of a majority of members. They come into their own at the AGM where members' support is needed for approving the previous year's report and accounts, electing officers and filling vacant MC places, appointing an independent auditor and voting on any motions (for example, whether to raise the level of membership subscriptions).

Members need to be given due notice of the AGM. They should also have the right to call a Special General Meeting if a written request is presented to the Secretary of the MC usually signed by a significant proportion of the membership. All these items should be detailed either in the constitution or in specially devised Rules of Procedure which must be made widely available.

Implications for the Organisation

Members generally apply to join an organisation because it is a cause or an institution they wish to support, but sometimes a small group may attempt to enforce policy changes on the MC from the floor or go on to become elected onto the MC. If these changes do not run counter to the organisation's Objects and as long as democratic procedures have been followed there is little that can be done to oppose them. The membership will decide the issue based on open debate.

However, the constitution usually specifies that potential members need to "wish to further the objects of the association". This could allow the refusal of membership to anyone from a rival or hostile organisation. The MC also usually has the constitutional right to terminate membership, albeit with some right of appeal for the other side. Normally termination is kept as a last resort after all attempts at reconciliation have failed.

Above all it is vital that the Secretary keeps an accurate register of members with each one's consent. This can then be used to decide issues over who has voting

rights at General Meetings. It is also essential to keep accurate records of whose subscription is overdue and any other financial information, for example of spontaneous donations or in response to an appeal. There are specially designed software packages available for the Honorary Secretary (or possibly a Membership Secretary) to use.

In general the MC will need to be more aware of needing to justify some decisions to the membership. Members who are dissatisfied with the way the organisation is run will either vote with their feet (by not renewing their subscriptions) or attempt to block actions where they feel there was insufficient consultation. In extreme circumstances a vote of no confidence could be passed, leading to a new MC being elected.

Communicating with Membership

Ways of ensuring essential news and information filters through to the members are a pre-requisite of developing a membership scheme. However the most effective communication is a two-way process. Members will want to feel involved in some way even if they have very little actual time to give.

The traditional way to reach your membership was via a regular newsletter. Thanks to higher postage costs and growing incidence of PCs in the home hard copy communication is giving way to internet-based media which have the advantage of speed and economy. E-mail also allows members to let you have their views, even when you haven't asked for them! Beware of the danger that informal e-mails can start to encroach on areas that should properly be discussed in open forum at a General Meeting.

Certain items are best posted out to members. These include the annual report, all voting papers and financial information, especially if this is not intended for wider distribution.

Costs: Benefits and Categories of Members

Starting a membership scheme should not be undertaken lightly. You will need to be convinced beforehand that the membership will benefit the organisation in as many ways as possible and (with luck) bring in some cash. Because of the manpower and other costs involved membership schemes are rarely money-spinners.

Some large organisations offer different categories with a menu of subscription rates. This can have advantages (for example, a corporate membership opportunity, or a one-off life membership) but it can also complicate the administration. It's probably best to start off simple.

Further Information

BOTTING, Nina, and NORTON, Michael
The Complete Fundraising Handbook. 4th ed. London, DSC, 2001

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