

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Working with groups of other art or craft forms

Many voluntary arts groups are part of well-established 'communities of interest' – they have strong links with other groups practising the same art or craft form as they are, whether that be street dance, watercolour painting or jewellery making. These communities are apparent through such things as national umbrella organisations, annual conventions and online social networks. They provide opportunities to share examples of good practice, to develop friendships between likeminded individuals, and to inspire artistic excellence.

However, groups may be less aware of the multitude of other art and craft forms that are out there, many of which are on their doorstep – groups that they may also be able to collaborate with for mutual benefit. This briefing highlights some of the main reasons your group might choose to work with groups of other art and craft forms.

Finding groups of other art forms

Many groups can be found by asking around your local community, talking to friends and family, and looking at posters and leaflets in local community centres and libraries, and on the Internet. You can also contact your local authority arts officer, via the council telephone switchboard or website, to ask for details of any groups they are aware of, or whether there is already a network or forum in your area which brings groups together.

The Voluntary Arts websites (UK, England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) also have, or are developing, directories of local groups. For more details, see the Further Resources section.

A. Sharing best practice

- **Advice and moral support** – groups often need advice and a helping hand from someone who has experienced a problem or situation before and knows how best to deal with it. National networks and umbrella organisations (including Voluntary Arts) are one source of guidance, but if it is a local issue, for example negotiating tenancy of a council-owned venue, then sometimes it is better to seek advice from someone closer to home.

Members of voluntary arts groups tend to be experts in their artistic field, since this is what has brought them together in the first place. The matters they are sometimes less knowledgeable about are often those that might affect all groups, regardless of art and craft form – things like legislation, regulations, marketing and IT. In these cases, local connections are invaluable, especially when you can meet up for a cup of tea and a chat with someone who has been there and done it all before.

- **Sharing expertise** – groups often have 'experts' on particular topics such as child protection, entertainment licensing, insurance, marketing or running a conference – people that have been on lots of training courses and read up on the subject in their own time. If you have a partnership or network with other groups in your area you could encourage them to make use of your expert's expertise. This not only benefits the group, but your expert also benefits from the experience of applying their expertise to other situations. Plus, the group you help may have an expert in another field who could help you.

Note: always double-check with a professional or regulatory body before making any decisions that could put people or money at risk.



- **Training** – sometimes when you send someone on a training course (such as how to communicate with the public or use a particular software application) you want them to come back and pass on what they have learned to your colleagues or other members (sometimes referred to as ‘cascading’ knowledge). By working with groups of other art forms you can spread this knowledge even further, and benefit from a reciprocal arrangement when the other group/s send their staff on training courses. Alternatively, you could share the cost of buying in the services of a trainer ‘in-house’ and all get together, either at one of your venues/offices or another location, for a shared training day.

- **Replicating success** – if you have had a particularly successful project, why not involve other groups in your evaluation process, to share the success and give them some ideas for how to replicate it in their own arena? If another group has done something particularly well, ask them how they did it and how open they would be to allowing you to replicate it, either wholly or in part.

Similarly, if something has gone wrong, share that information too. Try not to worry that it reflects badly on you – by sharing both the good and the bad you will build up a stronger relationship and a body of knowledge that will help avoid things going wrong again in future. By specifically identifying what you did well and working out what you could do better, you will be in an excellent position to excel in the future.

B. Working across art and craft forms

- **Combining art or craft forms** – it may not always be obvious how two or more art or craft forms can be combined, especially if they are completely different – like DJing and embroidery, or country dancing and computer animation. However, much of the most creative art work comes from juxtaposing two or more contrasting disciplines – think computer-generated textile designs, or orchestras put together through digital filmmaking and posted on YouTube. There’s no reason why you can’t come up with something totally new and imaginative – and, in doing so, open the minds of everyone involved to new ways of thinking about their art or craft.

- **Reaching new people** – taster days are a great way to get new members involved, and can be especially attractive to those who might be unable to make a firm commitment at the outset. However, it is not always cost-effective to run these days on your own. By getting together with groups of other art or craft forms you can share the costs of venue hire, administration and advertising, and provide a day of activities with a lot more variation and interest for all the family, and from a wider cross-section of the community. By offering a combination of activities that aren’t often associated with each other you will help break down perceived boundaries and give people the opportunity to try things they may never have previously dreamt of.

C. Cost savings

- **Bulk buying** – many products and services are cheaper if you buy in bulk. By co-ordinating your needs with local groups of other art or craft forms you may be able to negotiate discounts. For example, an IT supplier may be able to offer you a cheaper deal if you buy two or more computers at a time. If you are buying for more than one group, you may be able to save money by buying catering supplies at a cash-and-carry rather than a supermarket. However, be careful of entering into agreements that don’t suit your needs. Such deals can favour one party more than the other – be aware of this and try to get the balance right. The last thing you want to do is end up causing bad feeling by lumbering someone with a lot of supplies they don’t need and having to chase them for their share of the money – or finding yourself in this situation.

- **Sharing administrative functions** – another way of saving money is by sharing administrative functions, e.g. having a joint administrator, fundraiser or PR officer, for two or more organisations. This model promises considerable cost savings, but be careful – some groups’ constitutions preclude this type of arrangement, and even if they don’t you may still find yourself in difficulty and disagreement further down the line. Get advice from an employment specialist or advice service. If you do go ahead, make sure all arrangements are in writing and make sure everyone is clear about their nature.
Note: be aware of data protection law when it comes to things like sharing members’ contact details or mailing lists – for more information see VAN Briefing 46 – Data Protection Act 1998.



- **Sharing a venue/office/rehearsal space** – as with sharing an administrator, this type of arrangement is best suited to groups that have a lengthy relationship and have worked closely together in the past. The nature of the agreement will depend on who owns the venue, e.g. both parties leasing it from a landlord on an equal basis, one party leasing it and sub-letting it to the other, one party owning it and leasing it to the other, or both parties jointly owning it. Each set up will have different implications on the power relationship between the two groups, so make sure that there is a proper consultation and planning process and that everyone is happy at the outset. Ensure that all agreements are in writing and overseen by a solicitor or other legal professional.
- **Mutual promotion/publicity** – by working together on joint events and projects you can share the cost of publicity, such as advertising or buying in PR expertise. In addition, you can use each other's networks and venues for free publicity. If you have a newsletter you could include information about your partner groups, along with information about how the two art or craft forms might complement each other. You could put up a poster at your venue, and ask your partner group/s to do the same for you. You might even decide to offer discounts to your members (from fees, subscriptions or materials) if they want to attend the other group's classes, and vice versa.

D. Advocacy and campaigning

- **A stronger voice** – when it comes to getting politicians and policymakers to hear your opinions, and do something about them, the louder the voice the better. On a local level, your needs will most probably be closely aligned to other voluntary arts groups regardless of what art or craft form they are involved in. You might want better policing around your venue or a more dependable waste collection routine. By working together in a co-ordinated way you can make sure that your message is focused and more likely to be acted upon by those with the power to do something about it. Politicians and policymakers can often ignore individuals; it is only when they start hearing the same thing from different directions they begin to pay attention.

Rethinking what you do

Sometimes, rethinking what you do can open up a whole range of potential partnerships that you might not have thought of before. This doesn't necessarily mean changing what you are doing – just looking at it from a different perspective. For example, you may just think of your group as a space for people to come together to share an interest. That may well be true, but you are probably also a provider of learning, wellbeing and social connections.

By thinking about your group in this way you can better consider how you fit into the provision of facilities in your local area, and how you can link with other providers to maximise the mutual benefits. For example, you could get together with one or more groups of other art or craft forms and:

- contact your local council, university or college's adult education department and offer your artistic expertise in exchange for administrative or promotional help. They may be keen to help publicise your offering as part of a wider community 'lifelong learning' programme, especially if there is no cost to them. They may even invite you or one of your colleagues to teach a taster session or evening class.
- contact your local health provider or complementary therapies centre and ask what they are doing to improve wellbeing in the community and whether you could work together to increase people's mental and physical wellbeing by providing an outlet for their creativity.
- work across cultural boundaries to create a network of groups that celebrate differences and the benefits that can be achieved through close cooperation and mutual understanding. You might introduce people to an art or craft form they would never otherwise have considered doing – and maybe learn something yourself in the process.

Once you're comfortable working with groups of other art and craft forms, why not think about working with other (non arts) voluntary groups in your community which you may have something in common with?

Further Resources

The **Voluntary Arts** websites have, or are developing, directories featuring contact details for groups all over the UK and Ireland. They also feature guidance on a range of topics for voluntary arts and crafts groups in the 'Running Your Group' section.

- **Voluntary Arts Network** – for UK-wide voluntary arts and crafts umbrella and lead bodies – www.voluntaryarts.org
- **Voluntary Arts England** – www.vaengland.org.uk
- **Voluntary Arts Ireland** – www.vaireland.org
- **Voluntary Arts Scotland** – www.vascotland.org.uk
- **Voluntary Arts Wales** – www.vaw.org.uk

If you liked this briefing, you may also find the following VAN Briefings useful in helping you make connections beyond your group (available to download for free from www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings):

- 122 – **Reaching out to new audiences**
- 99 – **Lobbying politicians and policy makers**
- 98 – **Consultation: making it work for you**
- 96 – **Networking: not just nattering**

Other organisations

National voluntary sector bodies may have links to local networks:

- **National Council for Voluntary Organisations** (England) – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk (the NCVO Collaborative Working Unit was established to raise awareness of the opportunities offered by collaborative working – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborativeworking)
- **Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action** – www.nicva.org
- **The Wheel** – (Republic of Ireland) – www.wheel.ie
- **Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations** – www.scvo.org.uk
- **Wales Council for Voluntary Action** – www.wcva.org.uk
- **Contact details for County Voluntary Councils in Wales** are available from www.wcva-ids.org.uk/wcva/1050

Other publications

- **Potential benefits and risks of collaboration** – NCVO – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/index.asp?id=2039
- **A guide to good practice in collaborative working methods and new media tools creation** – Arts and Humanities Data Service – <http://ahds.ac.uk/creating/guides/new-media-tools>
- **Collaborative working and mergers: an introduction** – Charity Commission of England and Wales – www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc34.asp
- **Collaborative working** – Community & Voluntary Service, Mid and North Bedfordshire – www.voluntaryworks.org.uk/cvsmidandnorthbeds/CollaborativeWorking.asp

Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency. Updated information may be available on the VAN website: www.voluntaryarts.org

Disclaimer: Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the information in this document is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith at the stated date but without accepting liability. We therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

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