



**SHORT
GUIDES FOR
AMNESTY
LOCAL GROUPS**

GROUP SECRETARY

Amnesty International
PROTECT THE HUMAN

A SHORT GUIDE TO BEING A GROUP SECRETARY

THE ROLE

The secretary keeps the group running by serving as the main contact point between meetings, dealing with correspondence, making the practical arrangements for meetings, and keeping the group's records.

QUALITIES NEEDED

- well-organised
- punctual
- reliable and good at prioritising
- needs to have access to a computer, to be on email and telephone
- access to a photocopier and space to store group files would be useful.

WORKS CLOSELY WITH

The group chairperson, the treasurer and the other officers, and interacts with all members of the group. Outside the group, has contact with the regional representative, the local trainer and the Amnesty International UK office.

KEY TASKS

1 Main point of contact for the group
The secretary's address, phone number and email are the main contact point for the group. It is essential that secretaries inform the Activism Team if they move or will be away for more than three weeks with no-one to collect the mail (in which case an alternative contact should be provided). AIUK office staff will contact you occasionally and your regional representative may phone for a chat, to find out if you have any problems, or to let you know about important regional matters.

TIPS

- If people want to join the group: give them the date, time and place of the next meeting and take their contact details so the group can keep in touch with them.
- Local media: pass them straight on to the group's media officer or, if you don't have one, the chairperson.
- If individuals ask for help: groups cannot assist such people, who may require specialist advice. Contact the Activism Team for advice.

2 Sorting and distributing mail

TIPS

- Read mail once only and then ...
- Pass it on to your group members for action or information as soon as possible.
- If there is information to share or act on, discuss with your chairperson the key points, and how much time needs to be spent on it at the next meeting.
- Some groups deal with information that is not important to the whole group but may be to individuals by putting it on a 'browse' table at meetings.

3 Handling general correspondence

TIPS

- Keep a list of group members who have taken on responsibilities, with their contact details, so that advice can be sought, information or requests passed on.
- Work with the chairperson to try to allocate as many tasks as possible to other group members.
- If you have tricky correspondence to deal with, contact the Activism Team for advice.
- Prioritisation is an important skill for a secretary: prioritise things as they arrive, eg 'for immediate action', 'before the next meeting', 'in the next three months', 'for the attention of the chair, media officer, etc'.

4 Keeping the group's files

These will include correspondence, notes of meetings, reference materials, etc.

TIPS

The principles of good filing:

- Don't keep anything you'll never want to refer to again – be ruthless
- Invest (the group's money) in long-lasting folders and index boxes
- Design your filing system with retrieval in mind

The group store cupboard – the following are useful to have to hand:

- A selection of up-to-date materials
- A stock of current general Amnesty International leaflets.
- A selection of general AI posters

5 Making the arrangements for group meetings, helping the chairperson draw up the agenda and spreading the workload

This includes booking the venue, arriving early and putting up signs and notices as appropriate, making arrangements for speakers, trainers, refreshments etc.

TIPS

- Divide up the secretary's tasks, eg a minutes secretary, social secretary, membership secretary etc.
- Pass on small tasks to other individuals, eg organising and liaising with speakers, dealing with the monthly mailing.

SOME THOUGHTS FROM AN AI GROUP SECRETARY

So, you have landed up as group secretary! Perhaps you were formally elected at an AGM, perhaps you were press-ganged into the job. Either way, you have made a great move since you are right at the communications hub of the group. You will usually be the first to hear of every new development in Amnesty.

These thoughts lead me to a personal obsession: preparing the agenda for the group's monthly meeting. It's essential to transform the barrow-load of emails, letters and documents, bearing vital facts, into a simple form that everyone can understand. This is best done by putting dates, times, locations, names and other relevant details into the agenda so that no one leaves the meeting with serious misunderstandings. This takes time but it is worth it.

Of course, a secretary must from time to time be a pursuer of the forgetful, a recruiting sergeant for volunteers and a bloodhound for sniffing out elusive facts. A ready hand on the telephone is useful. When you're stuck you will find helpful ears at the Activism Team in London, in your Regional Reps and at the national offices in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

Everyone has his or her own method of filing. Make sure you have a system which does the job for you. Sooner or later it may burst at the seams, so use the shredder before this happens.

If you are apprehensive about taking on the job, my advice would be to give it your best shot. It is a role of cardinal importance – so, go for it!

Jim Moffat, Secretary of Edinburgh South Group

Amnesty International

We are ordinary people from across the world standing up for humanity and human rights. Our purpose is to protect individuals wherever justice, fairness, freedom and truth are denied.

Worldwide we have more than 2 million members. We are a democratic and independent organisation that follows no political or religious ideology.

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