

Amnesty International



# **SETTING UP A LOCAL GROUP**

## **A BRIEF GUIDE**

**PROTECT THE HUMAN**

Local groups are vital to the work of Amnesty International and they come in many different shapes and sizes.

This guide will give you some general information about Amnesty International and some useful advice on how to go about setting up a local group in your area.

Whether you're an old hand at grass roots campaigning, or you've never done anything like this at all, being part of an Amnesty International local group will give you the opportunity to meet like-minded people and work together to really make a difference.





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# WHAT IS AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL?

**Amnesty International is a movement of ordinary people from across the world standing up for humanity and human rights. Our purpose is to protect individuals wherever justice, freedom and truth are denied.**

Our members come from many different backgrounds and have widely different political and religious beliefs. They are united by a common vision of a world where the rights of all people are respected. Our appeals for victims of human rights violations are based on accurate research and on international law. Our movement is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

The organisation was launched in 1961 by Peter Benenson, a British lawyer. After reading about two Portuguese students who had been sentenced to seven years in prison for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom, he wrote a newspaper appeal, "The Forgotten Prisoners" (pictured). It was published worldwide and brought in more than 1,000 offers of support for the idea of an international campaign to protect human rights. Within 12 months the new organisation had sent delegations to four countries to make representations on behalf of prisoners, had taken up 210 cases, and had organised national branches in seven countries.

From a small group of volunteers in a tiny office in London, we have now become the world's largest international voluntary organisation dealing with human rights.

We have more than 1.8 million members, supporters and subscribers in more than 150 countries and territories. We have nationally-organised sections in 53 countries. We also have more than 7,800 local, youth, specialist and professional Amnesty International groups in over 100 countries and territories. We have over 260,000 individual supporters in the UK. Like many other organisations, we are guided by a mission, which explains the two main ways in which we campaign:

- Promoting general awareness of human rights; and
- Opposing specific abuses of human rights

Amnesty International is a participatory, democratic movement. Our members decide on the policy of the movement that they help to finance.



# WHAT DOES A LOCAL GROUP DO?

## YOU'D BE AMAZED!

The Local Groups of the UK Section of Amnesty International play an essential part in the fight for human rights worldwide. There are over 280 Local Groups based all over the country. They mostly work in their own communities, but they also get together to take part in regional conferences and events as well as national events such as the Annual General Meeting and National Conference.

The activities they do depend on the time and interests that each individual group has, but the general work involves:

- **raising awareness** of human rights in their community by taking part in local events,

organising their own events and street stalls, and working with the local media.

- **holding the government** and political parties to account on human rights by lobbying their local politicians.
- **writing to foreign governments**, military and prison authorities on behalf of individuals whose rights have been abused.
- **supporting** Amnesty International's global campaigns on issues such as torture, the arms trade and violence against women.
- and last but not least, they help to keep Amnesty International alive by recruiting new members, raising funds for its work, and contributing their knowledge, experience and views.



# HOW ARE LOCAL GROUPS SUPPORTED?

## GROUPS CAMPAIGNER

The local groups campaigner is the AI staff person responsible for support and development of local groups. The campaigner is the first point of contact for local groups.

## REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

There are up to 17 volunteer regional representatives covering Amnesty International UK's 13 regions (some job-share). They are a point of contact and provide support to local groups. They also act as a channel through which local groups and staff can communicate, raise concerns and share achievements. Regional reps also organise regional conferences. These conferences are an opportunity to motivate members to act on Amnesty International's campaign priorities, debate policy, take action, discuss regional issues and meet other members. They hold a regional forum four times a year to discuss relevant issues.

## NATIONAL OFFICES

As well as its London headquarters, Amnesty International has three national offices in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh that provide a focus for Amnesty International's campaigning and fundraising by members and groups in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. There is also a marketing presence in the Scotland office.

Staff and volunteers are responsible for Amnesty International's media relations, political lobbying, awareness raising and human rights education. They also host visiting international speakers on human rights, organise events



such as film festivals, and provide campaign resources and support for local, student and youth groups.

## LOCAL TRAINER

We have a well-established training programme with many volunteer trainers around the country who can come to a group meeting to deliver a workshop. Workshops are FREE, last about an hour and can be adapted by the trainer to your needs. They can be an interesting and enjoyable way to improve your knowledge and campaigning skills.

## RESOURCES FOR ACTIVISTS

Amnesty International has a range of materials for groups. There are short guidelines to help you in your campaigning, general leaflets to hand out to the public about Amnesty International and materials specific to campaigns and human rights issues.



# CAMPAIGNING ACTIVITIES

## LETTER WRITING

From the very beginning of Amnesty International in 1961, people have written letters on behalf of victims of human rights abuses. Today hundreds of thousands of ordinary people throughout the world challenge cruelty and injustice by taking a few minutes to write a letter.

Letters don't have to be long or detailed. Amnesty International will give the exact request to make in your letter and details of who to write to. Amnesty members who have specific knowledge about a country, a case or an issue may choose to write a more detailed letter, but all types of letters are valuable.

## LOBBYING

Lobbying is the business of trying to influence government policy by working with members of parliament. By contacting your local political representatives you can encourage them to prioritise human rights issues. As an individual or local group member of Amnesty International, any lobbying that you can do is of enormous value to the protection of human rights.

Lobbying raises political representative's awareness of Amnesty International as an organisation and our concerns. Political representatives are sensitive to the concerns of the electorate as they need your vote in the next election and most want a reputation as a good constituency political representative.

## MEDIA

Amnesty International's media work is carried out on three levels: local, national and international. Local group media work is of enormous value: it generates support for campaigns, attracts new members, raises funds and brings human rights issues to the attention of people who might not hear about them through the national media.

## COMMUNITY FUNDRAISING

Local groups are by far the most successful community fundraisers within Amnesty International, regularly raising over £250,000 a year to support our campaigning work. Fundraising is an essential part of the work of a campaigning organisation. Fundraising by local groups is vital in enabling Amnesty International to continue its work. Amnesty International is independent of governments. It relies on its supporters for the bulk of its income.

To support the activities of all community fundraisers – local groups, schools, youth groups, students, faith and other organisations, and individuals – a variety of materials are available from Amnesty: posters, leaflets, postcards, stickers, banners, balloons etc. Contact the Activism Team for details.

# HOW TO SET UP A NEW GROUP

**There are many ways of setting up a new local group and the staff in the Activism Team can help you. Here are some guidelines and tips.**

## **STEP 1: ORGANISE A MEETING**

Get a few interested people together to start you off. The first thing is to choose a date and find a suitable venue. Make sure that the venue is accessible.

Advertise your first meeting. You can issue a press release about your intention to set up a group and invite people to the meeting. We can give you a sample press release. Why not ask for a quote from a neighbouring group and use them in your press release. We can provide you with a sample flyer and poster, which you can put up around your community – the local library, university and community centres.

The UK section has over 200,000 members so there are bound to be quite a few near you, wherever you live! The office can provide you with addresses of all Amnesty members in your area, so you could send them the flyer and a covering letter inviting them to your meeting. Amnesty staff, your regional representative and/or your local trainer will all be happy to come along to the first meeting to help introduce the idea of an Amnesty Local Group to your community.

You will need to organise an agenda for the meeting. Allocate different parts of the agenda to different people.

## **STEP 2: THE FIRST MEETING**

Start the meeting by asking everyone to introduce themselves and say why they are interested in human rights. Explain the agenda and what you are hoping to achieve from this meeting – a new local Amnesty group!

- **Introducing Amnesty:** This is something you can ask a staff member/regional representative or trainer to do. Alternatively there are short videos available which explain Amnesty which you could show instead
- **Introducing Amnesty's current campaigns:** Again, this is something you can ask other experienced Amnesty members or staff to do.
- **Explain what a local group does.** People bring their knowledge, experience, ideas and enthusiasm to do human rights work as part of a group, everyone's contributions are valued and all are welcome. You should also emphasise the social aspect of a group working together (and celebrating together when they have had a campaign success!). You should also mention here the support that the group will get.
- **Get people to take action:** Amnesty produces a monthly action for local groups every month. People who join Amnesty want to do human rights work so it's good to get people to take action there and then to help set the scene. Ask the Activism Team for details of the current Monthly Action.
- **Questions & Answers:** Make sure you give plenty of time for questions
- **Show of hands:** Who is interested in setting up a group? If you have enough people interested you will need to explain the next steps...
- **Taking it forward:** Each group has a main



contact person... is there someone willing to take on this role? The next stage is to organise the next meeting

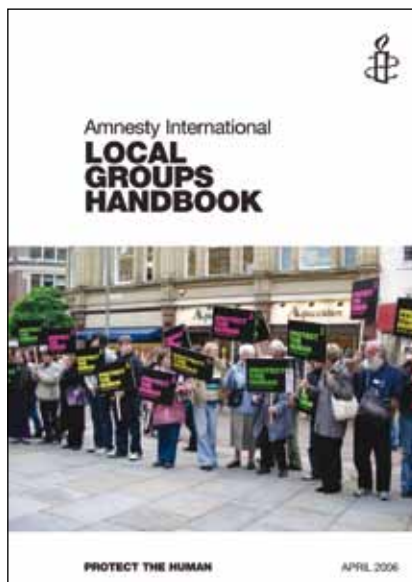
- This is where you will get into the detail and start allocating roles, eg someone may want to be a campaign coordinator, somebody else might want to focus on local media, someone to be the Group treasurer etc. You will need a small group of volunteers to help organise the next meeting: sorting out the agenda, agreeing a date for the next meeting that everyone can make, organising a suitable venue for the meeting.
- Thank everyone for coming!

### STEP 3: THE SECOND MEETING

The second meeting is where the group really begins to take shape! Again, you can invite the regional representative or a local trainer to help you with this meeting and answer questions. Use the Planning Pack (available from the Activism Team) to decide as a group what you want to focus on. The planning pack gives more details of Amnesty International's campaigns and you can decide which campaigns you would like to opt in to.

You need to agree who the contact person for the group will be. This person will be the link between the group and the head office – they will receive the monthly mailing and other communications.

Groups also need to open a bank account so you will need to appoint someone as a treasurer to deal with money matters.



Now that you have decided to set up an Amnesty International group, you need to complete a simple form whereby you declare your intention to set up an Amnesty International group. **Don't worry – this is not a legal document!** The group will then be given a Local Group Handbook, which explains the work of local groups in detail and how a local group fits into the Amnesty International movement. Upon registration you will be put on our list of local groups and will start to receive communications.

Local groups pay an annual subscription. Please check with the Activism Team for the current rate.

# COMMUNICATIONS

**Amnesty International UK sends a mailing to all local groups every month except August. The mailing is scheduled to reach you before the first day of each month. This monthly mailing is the basic way of communicating with groups. It may include the following:**

## GROUPS NEWS

This is a regular newsletter specifically for groups to share ideas, promote their events, and have their achievements recognised. It covers a range of activities from campaigning to fundraising, local events, news from Amnesty student and youth groups and regional conferences.

## MONTHLY ACTION

The monthly mailing contains an action, which is short and easy and takes about 10 minutes to do. An explanation of the issue is provided; with full instructions for what to do. It usually involves sending a letter or postcards to governments, local media or the individuals concerned. This has proved very popular with local groups. **WE STRONGLY ADVISE YOU** to do the monthly action at the beginning of your meeting. This sets the tone for an active, human rights focused meeting.

## CAMPAIGN ACTION BULLETINS

These are regular updates on Amnesty International major campaigns. They provide information and action on key campaigns. They contain what the campaign is about, what has been achieved, the priorities as well as relevant background information.

## AMNESTY MAGAZINE

Published bi-monthly, Amnesty magazine goes to nearly 200,000 members in the UK and has information on the latest human rights issues, campaigns and updates.

## GROUPS PLANNING PACK

The annual Planning Pack is sent to all groups at the beginning of the year. It outlines the main areas of work and gives you the chance to 'opt in' to specific campaigns and actions. You are strongly encouraged to use this to help you plan and prioritise the group's actions.



## START-UP: A NEW LOCAL GROUP GETS UNDER WAY

Having finally recovered from our successful first meeting, with an impressive turnout, we thought it might be good to say a little about how we made it happen.

It all started in Manchester at the Amnesty Regional Conference. Four of us from Leigh met up, and got chatting about the benefits of a group in our borough.

On returning, we were put in touch with each other via our regional representative who kindly came to meet us and talk through ideas for our first meeting. Three of us work at the Wigan and Leigh Council for Voluntary Service and our roles include empowering and supporting asylum seekers and refugees, as well as members of the wider community. We felt it would be great if we could use an Amnesty group to raise awareness locally of human rights issues and that we would then have the benefit of giving it a local feel by linking into issues faced by asylum seekers and refugees living in the borough. The fourth in our group works at a local school and is using citizenship classes to get the message on control arms and other human rights campaigns over to local young people.

Using our various contacts, we sent out emails and notices of the meeting, and contacted the local press who were very interested. Our regional representative agreed to come along to the meeting and give a talk on national campaigns and even paid for the room hire! Head office sent a letter from us to all local Amnesty members which really paid off, we had 13 people at the meeting, including us and another nine who are really keen to get involved.

So, anything is possible when you attend an Amnesty Regional Conference!

**Katy Crowson, from the brand new Wigan & Leigh local 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 almost 2 million members. We are a democratic and independent organisation that follows no political or religious ideology.

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**PROTECT THE HUMAN**

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