

Starting up a GA branch

You don't have to be mad to start up a branch. No, honestly, you don't – it's not as hard as you think. You just have to be determined to do something for yourselves and (with the help and support of staff at GA headquarters) you can create something that benefits everyone.

There was something wrong with the fact that Sheffield, home of GA headquarters, didn't have an active GA branch. So three heads of department and I (a returnee, after bringing up my young family) decided to do something about it. The timing was opportune: the LEA advisory service was being disbanded, so we needed to find a way of supporting teaching and learning in the area.

It's been a great experience getting a branch up and running and we hope that it will inspire a lot more of you to try it out. Here's how we did it.

Preparation is Everything!

We were lucky to have as mentor the ex-secretary of the defunct Sheffield branch, who had gone on to set up the Rotherham branch and was on hand to get us together and give us some guidance. Two short meetings in the summer term gave us plenty of time to finalise arrangements so we could launch our branch in October.

At the first meeting we thrashed out our 'branch vision' and divided up our roles. We decided to concentrate on supporting teachers: sharing resources and good practice, and offering CPD to celebrate and promote geography teaching in Sheffield. So everyone can be clear about what we are trying to achieve, our aims and objectives are published on the GA website (www.geography.org.uk/aboutus/branches/contactsprogrammes/sheffield) and have been sent out to all the secondary schools in Sheffield. This year our focus is on secondary teaching, but in future we will be able to support primary teachers too.

Our chairperson, John Hamshaw-Thomas, had contacts in the university and other schools, so accepted responsibility for organising speakers for the coming year. Because I had most time on my hands, I could take on the finance and administration. You don't need formal roles (Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, etc.) but if you plan to open a bank account you will find banks do like named individuals to sign forms. Andy James and Tim Murray undertook to organise the Worldwise Quiz and other odd jobs.

Hints and tips

Decide what sort of branch yours is going to be. Some branches concentrate on keeping retired teachers up to date with developments in geography; others, like ours, focus on CPD. Whatever you decide, you can be certain that the GA staff will support you all the way.

- Start by putting out feelers for colleagues able and willing to help you set up a branch. Your local humanities specialist school is a good place to start. Ask university staff (in both geography and education departments) to get involved too.
- It's a lot easier to get going and keep going if you've got someone involved who has a bit of time on their hands: a retired teacher/professor, a returnee or maybe even a part-timer. Be prepared to carve up jobs: some people will help if the work is made manageable for them.
- The wider your target audience, the more likely you are to be able to get someone to help run the branch. However, you then run up against the problem of providing something of interest to everyone every year. It's a fine balance, with no easy answer.

- Make sure as many branch members as possible are members of the GA as your GA subvention depends on it.
- Agree small fees to cover your costs and speakers' expenses and figure out how it will work (pay once a year for admittance to all events; pay for individual events; or some other mechanism). You will need letterheads, invoices and receipts. (Please feel free to download our templates from www.geography.org.uk/aboutus/branches. Perhaps other branches could offer their templates too!) Also decide whether you are going to print membership cards, and calendars of events, etc. If so, somebody will need to type, print and distribute all these things.
- Try and get as many e-mail addresses as you can so that unforeseen events, such as a postal strike, don't scupper your mailshot.
- Banks will be the bane of your life. Choose one that has really convenient locations and opening hours for as many members of the committee as possible.
- Use the staff at GA HQ. People who have been essential to us have been Frances Soar, Membership Services Manager, and Anne Greaves, Website Production Editor.

The boring bits and generating income

There's no escaping the form filling. GA form filling is quite straightforward and Frances Soar, Membership Services Manager, is extremely helpful. She can also provide you with a properly accredited database of local GA members to target. Check with Frances if you will be resurrecting a dormant branch, like us, or starting from scratch. If the latter, there is a branch affiliation form to fill in. Frances will also send you a form to apply for a subvention: funding, in other words. You need a minimum of four members who are members of the national GA, and the more branch members who are members of the GA the more funding you receive. Frances can also arrange additional 'pump priming' funding – extremely useful to make sure you get your message out to as many people as possible and for essentials such as refreshments at the launch event.

The GA does expect you to send in a copy of your accounts each year and this can be off-putting. However, as long as you can use a spreadsheet and have someone to enter income and payments, it should be straightforward. Frances Soar can give you further advice about this aspect of running a branch too.

Opening a branch bank account is the most convoluted and technical bit to arrange. It's up to you who you bank with (see the

hints and tips below) but they all have lots of forms for you to fill in! They require named individuals with roles such as chair, secretary and treasurer before they will let you open an account. You should also consider asking a GA member of staff to become a third signatory to the bank account, so that funds can be accessed if a branch becomes inactive.

Most GA branches charge a nominal fee for branch membership (usually no more than £5) so you probably won't have huge sums to play with; however, you may need a savings account alongside your current account. You can also ask local businesses for sponsorship (e.g. banks, travel agents, outdoor clothing companies etc.), especially if you plan to run a Worldwise Quiz and want to offer good quality prizes.

Location, location, location

Finally, where you hold your meetings can have a big impact on your costs. We decided early on that we would use each other's schools to host this year's events. We now need to make sure that we can find hosts all over Sheffield, not just in the affluent south-west of the city. You may be able to pull some strings to get hold of a central location for a good price. Alternatively, your local university may be able to offer you a room at a reduced rate.

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