



Appoint a ‘Staff Action Group’

TN130 Training Notes series: Structures

These notes were first published on the website in April 2021 and last updated in March 2023. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

Many churches appoint and employ paid staff. It may be only a part-time Administrator or a part-time Children’s Worker, but it may be a larger number including full timers: pastors, operations staff, young people’s workers, musicians. In some networks the Trustees will employ the Minister too.

The employer will normally be the Trustees (so PCC, Church Council, Board). But many Trustees fail to appreciate the responsibility they carry for the selection, employment and management of their staff.

As employers who are Christians there are indeed major issues both for compliance with legislation and for the welfare and development of the staff. But it is best if this responsibility can be fully owned by perhaps three or four people on behalf of the trustee body. Hence the idea that the church should set up a ‘Staff Action Group’.

Here are four questions to ask.

1 What is this group’s purpose?

The Trustees delegate to the Action Group the day-to-day responsibility for ensuring that all the paid staff are selected, employed and managed well. Staff should feel that the Trustees value their employees and treat them with excellence. The Trustees *delegate* to the group; they are in no way passing the buck. So regular communication between the two bodies is vital and terms of reference should be crystal clear.

Most of the group’s work will carry on at a reasonably constant level month by month. But there will be occasional spikes. They will have extra work over the appointment of new staff, preparing paperwork and overseeing the selection procedure.

The group will also have specific work to do when there is a grievance or disciplinary issue or a redundancy situation. They may need to take external advice when there is any issue that is out of the ordinary.

In fact it would be wise for most groups to have an external HR consultant who they can turn to at any time, perhaps even paid a retainer. This might be provided by the denominational structures, or might be chosen by the group with the authority of the Trustees themselves.

In smaller churches the Action Group might also be responsible for certain leadership posts that are not remunerated and so not under contract law. These notes, however, are restricted to those who are, or would normally be, paid.

2 Who should be chosen?

Here are the kind of people who should ideally form such a group.

- **One of the Trustees**
It is important that at least one Trustee serves on this group to ensure there is good communication back to the employing body and to underline the point that this is a Trustee responsibility. But you do not have to have the whole group made up of Trustees.
- **An HR specialist**
Yes, there may be no one in your church who fits this description, but is there at least someone who understands HR, perhaps someone who runs their own business and employs staff? You really need to find a practitioner who is aware of necessary policies.
- **Someone with pastoral gifts**
If you have one member who understands the legal issues, you need another member who cares deeply about people, their health and well-being. They should be someone who makes it their job to know each member of staff and how they are feeling about their employment.
- **Someone with administrative gifts**
The group ideally needs a member who is good at meticulous detail, to ensure that personnel records are kept in a secure environment, that actions are carried out and not forgotten, that staff can trust the efficiency of the group and that they stay properly accountable to the Trustees.

So there are four roles, but the group needs to be small. Three people might be ideal, so expect some of those roles to double up among the members. You are not appointing a large, safe committee. You are looking for a small, effective, executive group that the Trustees can trust to carry out their legal and pastoral responsibilities.

3 What might the group be called?

Groups like this are sometimes known as the 'HR' or 'Personnel' Committee but I have questions about these terms. First, 'HR' or 'Personnel' sounds impersonal as though the group was concerned only for legalities. These notes use the name 'Staff Action Group' with a more personal ring to it, but that will only work well when the word 'staff' is assumed to relate to paid employees. Some churches use the term more widely.

There may of course be people who are to all intents and purposes paid employees but simply take no remuneration. These might well be seen as 'staff'. The dividing line between them and other volunteers can become fuzzy.

Secondly, try to avoid the term 'committee' for any responsibility but for staffing the C word gives all the wrong messages. The group may meet for five minutes after a church service and be in constant touch with each other by phone or in person. It is not so much a formal committee with long meetings, but a sharply defined working group getting on with the job 24/7.

Call it a Working Group, an Employment Team (as long as it is a 'team') or whatever. One weakness of the Action Group title of course is what the initials spell!

4 **What are their key responsibilities?**

Here are seven major areas to consider.

1: **To ensure compliance with employment legislation**

The group will need to oversee the proper application of all relevant employment legislation including:

- Employment contract law
- Health and safety
- Hours worked
- Discrimination
- ... and so staff handbook
- ... and the correct approach for any self-employed workers or interns.

They will also be responsible for the writing and updating of all church policies and procedures impacting employment. There will be the need to oversee any Occupational Requirements (ORs) under discrimination legislation for each post.

See Article A8, *Worker agreements*, and Training Notes TN92, *How genuine are your GORs?*, and TN111, *A church policies checklist*, for detail.

2: **To seek best practice in the selection of new staff**

The group will be responsible for the process of defining the role, producing the relevant paperwork, advertising the post and arranging short-listing and interviews, often jointly with the relevant manager.

In addition there will be considerations of staff who leave their posts (such as the provision of exit interviews) and issues of retirement, which in church posts can raise awkward pastoral issues.

See Article A17, *Staff selection step-by-step*, and TN95, *Exit interviews for everyone*, for detail.

3: **To ensure that staff are properly managed**

Some churches assume that line management equates with annual appraisal but there is far more than that to good management. Many Trustees assume the Minister has all this in hand, but often Ministers have little experience of good line management and do not understand its scope.

The group might arrange training for staff who manage others so that this can be a role that is carried out to high standards. They might check that the Minister is not managing more than three or four people and advise on possible structures so that everyone is properly covered.

The aim of good management is to develop staff to be the best that they can be, rather than to supervise or control them.

See Article A32, *Be creative as a line manager*, and Training Notes TN20, *Line management in a staff team*, for detail.

4: To take pastoral interest in the well-being of staff

This would range over ensuring that staff are not being forced into working significantly over their hours and are encouraged to give proper time to their family if appropriate and to their own well-being.

But it also includes ensuring that there are safe and comfortable workplaces, and that everyone has proper equipment to enable them to fulfil their roles well. Too often I see an Administrator with a slow PC past its use-by date, or a Youth Minister having to use their own equipment to show DVDs to their group.

Note that there could be a conflict of interest if the group tried to offer personal pastoral care to members of staff and a disciplinary issue then arose. The group should ensure that each staff member has good pastoral cover from a small group, a prayer triplet and/or an external pastor, rather than trying to be that pastor themselves. But they still need to have a pastoral concern for everyone.

5: To recommend appropriate pay scales, pensions and other financial benefits

This is an area where the Trustees will have the final say, but the group should be recommending proper salary scales, annual increments and the correct provision of pension provision within legal requirements. They should advise the Trustees on how to treat benefits in kind such as housing, and ensure efficient repayment of expenses. For interns there will be issues of minimum/living wage to watch out for.

The group might also consider issues of how to pay all the staff. Should, for example, staff pay rates be linked to national scales or might they match local norms? What about how lay staff rates compare with Minister rates if these are dictated by an external body? And what if the secular norm for an Operations Manager is double what the church is prepared to offer?

See Training Notes TN80, *Staff salary schemes*, for detail.

6: To recommend staff training within agreed budgets

Many churches pay scant attention to staff training but it should be built into each role, and the staff as a whole would benefit from team training. The Action Group might oversee a staff training budget and encourage each member of staff to undertake appropriate training each year. This might be with a visiting trainer in-house, an external course or event, distance learning, or on-the-job training, including induction to the role.

7: To guide the Trustees when problems occur

The hope is that this will rarely be necessary, but when problems arise they can generate a considerable workload. There may be issues of performance, grievance, discipline, dismissal, safeguarding or redundancy. There may also be matters of relationship breakdown without any formal legal procedure initiated. There could be a problem if an elderly member of staff refuses to retire, or if staff turnover under a new Minister seems unreasonably high.

The Trustees themselves need to be informed and often involved in such matters, but the group will be responsible for guiding them to make wise decisions. The Action Group will need to judge what they can manage themselves, what has to be decided by the Trustees, and where there is a need to take external advice, such as for dismissal or safeguarding. There are likely to be issues of confidentiality that need to be assessed.

Some people feel that Christians working together as a staff are unlikely to run into such difficulties. That view is sadly misplaced as countless incidents confirm. In fact, working on a church staff team has pressures greater than in a secular workplace. This is because one's faith, the church community and the workplace are so tightly bound together.

Staff selection, employment and management is a Trustee issue, but so often gets side-lined because there is no one person or small group to own this responsibility. A Staff Action Group, clearly accountable and properly resourced, can enable the church to treat its employees with all due concern and care. The benefits can be immense.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN130. See also Articles A8, *Worker agreements*, A17, *Staff selection step-by-step*, and A32, *Be creative as a line manager*. Also Training Notes TN20, *Line management in a staff team*, TN80, *Staff salary schemes*, TN92, *How genuine are your GORs?*, TN95, *Exit interviews for everyone*, and TN111, *A church policies checklist*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about consultancy on issues of church or mission staffing.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN130 under Structures (with a link to Management).

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans AL1 4AG

Tel: 01727 832176 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>