

Support through branch/group contact

The benefits of a proactive branch/group contact

People living with MND often tell us of the sense of isolation they feel. A proactive branch/group contact is there to maintain contact with people with MND, their families and carers, ensuring they are informed of the work of the branch/group and the Association

They are one of the vital links between the Association and people living with MND and are an essential part of the local team working together with the Association Visitors (AVs), Area Support Coordinators (ASCs) and the branch or group.

They can also play a central role in building relationships with Health and Social Care Professionals and the local community by being easily accessible and having up to date information.

They can be the first point of contact someone has with your branch/group so making the right first impression is so important.

Whether it is someone who has just been diagnosed, or a family member wanting information and support we need to ensure that they receive a welcoming contact from the branch/group, together with information about what services are available to them both locally and from the Association.

Depending on the nature of the call it may not be appropriate to ask too many questions or give a lot of information that is not requested. The important thing when receiving a call is to find out why the caller has phoned, ascertain what help and information you can offer at this stage, and that you offer to keep in touch.

Skills and abilities required for the branch/group contact

The role of the local branch/group contact requires a mix of knowledge, patience, sensitivity and understanding. Volunteers find it extremely valuable to do the AV training purely to carry out this role and we actively encourage anyone not already trained as an AV to attend the AV training in order to carry out this role effectively.

The person taking on this responsibility should be prepared to seek support from other members of the branch/group and/or the Association's staff, initially the Area Support Coordinator. A role description outlining the main tasks is available on the Volunteer Zone.

Practical requirements - dedicated phone

Some branch and group contacts have in the past either a second phone line coming into the home, or a second phone number on the same line.

More recently branches and groups have found it more practical to provide their contact with a dedicated mobile phone. This has a number of advantages over the permanent phone line.

- The number can stay the same even if the person who is acting as Contact changes
- There is no line rental costs and difficulties of registering in a directory
- If the Contact is on holiday or taking time out from their role it can be passed to a chosen deputy (or the calls diverted)

- The number can be published in branch/group communications

Please note that some callers may be hesitant to ring as they view calling a mobile expensive. It is important that if a mobile is used the contact always offers to ring the person back, thereby saving the callers costs.

Appropriate answer phone message

Having a dedicated phone line enables an appropriate MND related answer phone message to be put on which gives people confidence and reassurance that they have reached the correct number. It also allows the contact time to choose to either respond straight away, or to let the answer machine take a message and phone back when there is time to deal with it appropriately.

Example answer phone message:

"This is xxx xxx of the xxx Branch/ Group of the MND Association. I am sorry but I can't take your call right now. Please leave your name and telephone number and I will get back to you as soon as possible. If you call is more urgent, please telephone MND Connect on 08457 626262".

Guidance on answering calls

When answering a call, it is important to give the caller reassurance that

- they have all the time they need to talk.
- you have some understanding of what they are going through
- no question is unimportant or too trivial
- what they say will remain confidential within the Association
- they will be given any information sensitively and at their own pace

Remember

- Good signposting reduces the number of people a caller has to phone, as they get accurate up to date information. This makes the process easier for them
- It is good practice to answer the phone with phrases such as "Good morning/afternoon, MND Branch/Group name, how can I help you?"
- It is important to focus immediately on that call, rather than anything that is happening around you. Consider your environment – can anyone overhear what should be a private conversation? Can the caller hear a television or people talking in the background, giving the impression that you are not giving them your full attention?
- Speak clearly
- Listen
- Reflect what has been said to you
- If you tell the caller that you are going to do something, ensure that you do it quickly and/or give them a time by which you will respond by
- Go the extra mile
- Value people as individuals
- Keep everybody clearly informed and involved
- A warm and friendly manner puts the caller at ease
- If you don't know an answer to a question offer to find out and phone them back. There may be issues that you feel would be best dealt with by MND Connect Helpline. If so, then do pass on the MND Connect number or ask if they would like MND Connect to call them. Do get the callers permission to pass on their details as MND Connect are unable to contact people without this.

NB: *Keeping the MND Association membership form handy during calls will help prompt you to ask for the required minimum information and permissions needed in order for us to be in touch with the caller in the future.*

What do we mean by being a proactive branch/group contact?

Rather than waiting for people to make contact you may want to consider ways to take the initiative and make contact with any new people in your area. These are people who have either been advised to you by your ASC or who appear on the monthly contact list on your information exchange site from Francis Crick House.

You may want to first send them a branch/group Welcome Letter enclosing a branch/group leaflet and saying that you will phone in a few days to introduce yourself.

Then you can follow the letter up with the promised call; explain in more detail about where and when the branch/group meetings are held. If people are interested, then you could offer to meet them there and introduce them to people. If at this stage they prefer not to attend, then check if there is anything else you can help them with. Also offer to keep in touch and phone again in a few weeks' time.

Once someone has been in contact with the Association, we are keen to maintain that contact. So, whether you have contacted them, or they have phoned you, remember to continue regular contact by offering:

- to ask an ASC to call
- to keep in telephone contact with the individual and thus ensure the person is in regular contact with the Association
- to offer to send them a copy of the newsletter and add them to the circulation list
- to invite them to Branch/Group meetings and ring prior to the meeting to remind them of the date, time etc. and offer to arrange transport when needed.

This should ensure that your branch/group is in touch on a regular basis with more people with MND.

Record keeping and confidentiality

There should be no need to keep copious records of calls taken by the contact. Any written information should be kept in a secure place, preferably under lock and key. If records are kept on a computer, then there is a need to ensure that passwords are used to protect any information relating to people living with MND.

More information on the best practice for keeping any records can be found on the Volunteer Zone.

The role of the branch/group contact will mean you will come into contact with people who share with you financial, personal and emotional information.

Remember

- This remains confidential to the Association, not just to one individual. This information can be shared with anyone within the Association on a need to know basis to ensure the best care for people living with MND. ***Please ensure you get the consent of the person to share their information.***
- It would be inappropriate for you to discuss information with anyone outside the Association or with other people living with MND
- As a branch/group contact you may need to pass on information face to face at a committee meeting. It is good to prepare before attending and decide what information it is necessary to share.
- It is important to remember confidentiality at branch/group meetings and not repeat any details without the consent of the person with MND.
- As a branch/group contact you may well need to share a difficult call with someone else, for your own benefit and support. This needs to be with someone appropriate within the Association e.g. your ASC, AV or another branch/group contact.

More guidance on Confidentiality can be found in the policies and guidelines section on the Volunteer Zone.

It is also essential that you feel you are receiving the support and assurance you need. Your ASC is always ready to talk to you about any additional support you may require at any time.

Communication

Good communication is vital to ensure the best possible support to people living with MND. It is important to keep relevant people clearly informed and involved, for example, if someone recently diagnosed with MND calls in, it is particularly important to keep the ASC informed, as they may not already be aware of that particular person or their needs.

It is also good to keep the committee up to date with how many people are using the contact number and, in general terms, the reason why. However, at all times remembering the policy on confidentiality and the level of information shared.