



Official guide to setting up and maintaining a Pro-Life society

Remember, this guide aims to offer advice. You do not need to follow everything we have suggested. Similarly, if you have better ideas then act on them – and let us know if they worked.

This guide is split into four sections:

1. Why have a pro-life society?
2. Getting started.
3. What to do as a society.
4. Passing the baton on.

1: WHY HAVE A PRO-LIFE SOCIETY?

The most effective change is always brought about by groups of committed and organised individuals. When Cambridge University Student Union held a referendum of its members on affiliation to the National Abortion Campaign (NAC), the pro-life group persuaded 65% of the entire student body to vote NO.

Universities provide fantastic opportunities for influencing others. They frequently foster an atmosphere of debate, and most people are open to being challenged. Universities also contain the leaders of tomorrow. If they are not on our side, then our chances of shaping the future are dramatically smaller.

Remember – there is no need for you to spend tens of hours a week working for the society. Some of the most effective tactics require minimal effort. The amount you do is up to you.

Key objectives of any society can include:

- Apologetics: To influence other people.
- Social: To support other pro-lifers and make like-minded friends.
- Action: Try to influence political and/or institutional outcomes.
- Welfare: To campaign for better support for pregnant and parenting students.

2: GETTING STARTED

In the beginning

Getting people together

- Find friends willing to start with you. We tend to be braver when supported by others, and it provides us with a more powerful voice too.
- Always begin with the aim of delegating to others. The society will get more work done, and you'll be less burdened with the workload!

Any rules?

- Different universities operate in different ways. At some universities you may need to register with your Students' Union to gain access to the

Freshers' Fair and/or obtain additional funding. Your Students' Union should be able to provide advice. If you need any advice, contact Student LifeNet.

- At most Universities, becoming an official society brings financial benefits but being an unofficial society still provides you with access to Freshers' Fair and University buildings. You need to weigh up the different costs/benefits of being an "official" society – it will differ depending on your university. It might help to provide a more secure future for your society – but it might also bring time-wasting bureaucracy.

What you need

Committee

- It is normally advisable to wait until after Freshers' Fair before forming a committee. There might be keen Freshers!
- At a very basic level, the committee should consist of at least a President and a Treasurer. Other positions are up to you. What is essential, is that everyone is contributing at least something.

Constitution

- If you have to/insist on having a constitution then make sure it is as short as possible. Remember, you want to spend your free time influencing others – not bogged down with bureaucracy!
- See the 'Guides' section of our website for a sample constitution.

Money!

- You may need a couple of quid to start with – usually to cover the costs of Fresher's Fair and your first meeting. Your Students' Union may even provide some funding.
- After that, you can raise money by organising fundraising events, asking for a £1 at the door of a talk or debate (unless you feel this may deter , or writing to those who have graduated from the University.

Mailing list

It obviously helps to keep in touch with society members. If your Students' Union or University Computing Service does not already provide a free mailing list service, you could try:

- Yahoo! Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>). Allows the moderator to have complete control over the group. It can be made private to stop others infiltrating. Files can also be uploaded. The moderator requires a free Yahoo! ID but others do not.
- MSN groups (<http://groups.msn.com/>). Similar to Yahoo! Groups but a little less simple to use.

Remember while its good to keep members informed, don't bombard them with messages! Keep communication short and use descriptive subject headings.

Freshers' fair

The most important event of the year – for increasing your membership at least – is Fresher's Fair.

What you need:

- A stall – your Students Union should provide details. This might cost around £10.
- Sign-up sheets (consisting of name and email address at a minimum).
- A banner - there will be hundreds of other societies there. You need to stand out!
- A leaflet detailing the date & venue of your first meeting (which you will have already organised).
- Information about what your society does (to be communicated verbally or on the first meeting leaflet).

For the more creative, you could also:

- Have stickers.
- Have signs pointing to the pro-life society stall.
- Have someone handing out leaflets at religious stalls and political stalls.

Rota:

Freshers' Fairs can go on for several days. Be sure you have a rota so someone isn't sitting there for too long! And put people together – no-one should be doing it on their own.

What else?

- Get other sympathetic societies to advertise the pro-life society at the start of term.
- Use other means of communication – e.g. noticeboards, internet websites – to advertise the society.

"What if we missed Freshers' Fair?"

If you set your society up after the start of the academic year, then not all is lost! You can still ask sympathetic societies to advertise yourselves. Don't forget to make full use of noticeboards and relevant internet websites (www.facebook.com can be very useful if your university is listed).

And don't forget about good old-fashioned word-of-mouth!

3: What to do

There are four main areas any society can cover:

- Apologetics: Influencing other people.
- Social: Supporting other pro-lifers and making like-minded friends.
- Action: Trying to influence political and/or institutional outcomes.
- Welfare: Campaigning for better support for pregnant and parenting students.

Committee meetings

First, though, a word about committee meetings. Our experience suggests that societies/organisations that get a lot done tend to meet at least once every two weeks. This helps to keep the momentum going. If you start delaying meetings to accommodate people then others tend to slack off and the work tends to fall to one or two people.

Make sure you also have a rough agenda which is kept to so no-one goes off on a tangent (meaning it takes twice as long to achieve what you want from the meeting).

Minutes should be kept in case you need to check what was discussed at the previous meeting and what decisions were made et cetera. It's additionally worth noting those who attend regularly so that you can gauge who are active.

You may wish to construct a flexible calendar of events so that members know in advance when the next meeting/talk/protest is – encouraging maximum turnout and commitment.

Apologetics

This can take a variety of forms:

- Bringing in outside speakers – Student LifeNet can provide a list.
- Organising debates – again, Student LifeNet can provide advice on opposition speakers.
- Poster/leaflet campaigns.
- Demonstrations.
- Writing articles for student newspapers.

Remember, you may want to target particular events or information at particular audiences. Medical, law, and political students should receive extra attention!

Social

Some pro-lifers complain of feeling isolated and unsupported. Organising a get together in a pub, or a dinner out, can help motivate and energise your members. Plus, it's also a great way to make new friends!

Countless psychological studies emphasise the importance of supportive social networks for maintaining beliefs and having the courage to act on them. The importance of social activities should not be underestimated.

It is also important to help educate and train pro-lifers. Encouraging people to keep up-to-date with the news is important, as is organising educational talks. It is also useful to bring in outside speakers who can encourage students to be active in the pro-life movement.

Action

It is not enough simply to influence people. At the end of the day, our ultimate goal as a movement is to ensure decisions are decided in our favour. You have the opportunity to effect change at the level of the University in several ways:

- Organising demonstrations and/or campaigns.
- Supporting candidates in elections for the Students' Union and representation at the NUS.
- Submitting motions and defeating pro-abortion ones in your Students' Union.
- Challenging the legality of an affiliation to pro-abortion groups – don't let the Students' Union waste your money.
- Supporting national campaigns.

On the note of supporting national campaigns, it is important not to get too caught up in the occupations of other pro-life groups. Remember, only your group is in a position to effect change at your university – no-one else. This should be your main priority above national concerns. Many national groups' campaigns are better focused on outside of term-time.

Effectiveness

Remember to assess the effectiveness of any campaign you organise. A leafleting campaign might end up being time-consuming, costly, and ineffective. Try to maximise influence and minimise costs and time where possible. Getting press coverage is often a very quick and easy way of reaching a large audience.

Campaigns also ought to be as fun and pro-active as possible. Humour often works well. This prevents boredom, gives off a light-hearted image, and helps to attract other students to your cause.

Welfare

You can help the welfare of pregnant and parenting students in several ways:

- Firstly, be aware of whether there is a LIFE or CARE pregnancy counselling centre in your area (see their respective websites). However, a word of caution: make sure you know these are staffed full-time. You don't want to refer someone to a centre which is now closed or badly run.
- You could advertise welfare provided by your University, and direct people to the welfare advice on the Student LifeNet website.
- Investigate the services provided by your University and/or Students' Union and campaign for improvements. Encourage them to advertise pro-life counselling centres.
- For more advice, contact the Student LifeNet welfare officer/s.

4: Passing the baton on

Student societies are like relay races – in order to keep them alive you have to make sure you pass the baton on successfully from one person to the next. Otherwise you will lose the race (or die out).

For this reason make sure that officers of the society keep records of where you can hold meetings cheaply, how to organise Freshers' Fair, etc etc. This makes it easier to pass information on. When someone new takes over they shouldn't need to start from scratch again.

Almost all societies which collapse do so because the transferral process is rushed. Don't leave it a few weeks before the start of a new term – make sure the new President is voted in before the end of the preceding academic year.

Finally... some advice from others

- "Ensure you're not just reacting to what pro-choicers are doing, but are actively setting the agenda yourselves. That way you'll stay ahead of the opposition" Patrick Leahy, ex-director Student LifeNet.
- "Make sure your group is cohesive and agrees on the main focus - don't let people speak on behalf of your group without prior agreement" Sarah Macken, ex-director Student LifeNet.
- "Be organised" Oxford University ProLife Society.
- "If campaigning against an opposition group, always be the first to lead with ideas - be creative in your methods" Cambridge University, pro-life Society.