

Recruiting presidents and patrons

While by no means essential, a well-chosen president or patron can enhance the activities and profile of your branch or group locally. Here are some things to consider if you are thinking of recruiting for a president or patron.

Step 1: Who to ask to be a patron or president?

It is important to have a reason for the ask. There is usually little point in targeting someone just for their 'name' alone and no other reason, or without thinking through what role they could play for you. It's going to be much more valuable to have someone with either some awareness of MND, whether professionally or through personal connection, or someone who has a reason to be interested in MND who will then have something to offer. Plus, there is often value in asking someone because they have a local connection and are respected and influential in the community.

Don't necessarily expect to come up with the name of a potential candidate straight away. Discuss at your committee or planning meetings over time, ask your branch/group members for their thoughts and talk it over with your Area Support Coordinator (ASC) – they will have examples from other areas they can share.

If someone occurs to you that you think might make a good patron or president then begin to research them. Read all you can, try to get an understanding of why becoming involved with you might be appealing to them.

Some thoughts of who to consider:

- Neurologist or medical professional
- MP's, former MP's and AMs
- A local media figure/business leader.
- Local dignitary
- Someone local in society who might have grounds or a building they might sometimes be prepared to let you use for events

If you are considering approaching a celebrity then remember that celebrity relationships are particularly complex to manage and though the idea of a celebrity may seem appealing, you may be better off thinking of someone less high profile but able to actually give you more of their time or expertise. If you do decide to approach a celebrity or indeed any high profile figure it's crucial that you first approach the celebrity and VIP manager who can be contacted via the External Affairs team as this may be someone who we may already be cultivating a relationship with for the Association as a whole. Whilst celebrities can bring publicity, you need to be sure they are going to be an appropriate ambassador for your branch or group and the Association.

Case study 1

South Hertfordshire Branch asked the Macmillan Consultant in Palliative Medicine to be their patron. In her role as consultant, she already coordinates monthly meetings for healthcare professionals involved with a range of neurological conditions. Having expressed an interest in improving services and life for people with MND, the committee had no hesitation in asking her to be their patron.

Step 2: How to ask them to become a patron or president?

It is worth spending some considerable time on getting the initial approach right. It should be personally targeted to them and not feel like a round robin letter which just happens to have their name at the top.

Don't ask for a meeting straight away (unless it is via a close mutual contact who offers to do so). They will make their decision largely on the basis of what you say in your letter or e-mail so it needs to be impressive, outlining the work of the Association and of your branch or group and why you would like to ask them to consider becoming a patron. Keep it to a maximum of two pages and enclose some brief information about MND or your branch/group leaflet. Make sure that it gets to the right person. If you are able to get a number for their office, call and find out the name of their assistant if they have one. If you are thinking of asking someone like a neurologist or MP try to begin cultivating a relationship with their PA or assistant, who can be very influential and if impressed by you can help influence a positive outcome. People sometimes think it is clever to bypass an assistant and find a way straight to the person, in most cases that backfires.

In the letter explain a little about the role of the patron or president, being clear but not making it sound too onerous. Try not to specify a set amount of events they should attend or be too prescriptive. Ideally you want to get their input on what they feel could be useful to you and for them to feel it is a privilege to be asked and that they could play a valuable (though not time consuming) role.

Conclude your letter with an offer to have a meeting to explain more if they would like, although aim for your letter to be persuasive enough on its own that they might just want to say yes straight away. Then wait. They may be out of the country; they are undoubtedly busy and as a charitable request you'll need to wait for it to rise to the top of the pile so it could take some time before you get a response. At the very least, give it several weeks.

If you get a positive response to the idea of a meeting, make sure it is held somewhere convenient for them. It's good to have two people attend from your branch or group to give each other support, but no more than that. Don't make it too formal but make sure you get to the point relatively quickly. Try to draw out of them what they might be interested in and how they might be able to help. Ask at the end how they would like to proceed, would they like a little more time to think it through and when should you contact them again. Ideally, they will say 'yes' right there.

If it comes back as a no, saying they are too busy at present, respond politely and ask if it would be ok if you sent the occasional information about your work through. Sometimes 'no' can just be a stage on the way to a 'yes in the future. But if it's a firm no, send a note to thank them for giving it their consideration and move on. If they agree to take on the role, whether to your initial approach or from the meeting, send a letter to formally acknowledge this and to say how much you look

forward to working with them. If it's not been mentioned before now is also a good time to outline that the role of patron or president is usually for a term of three years and has to be ratified by the Board of Trustees.

Case study 2

The Tyne and Wear Branch asked a long-standing member of their branch committee who had been treasurer for 6 years and chair for 5 years to become a president. As an effective public speaker, he had represented the branch in a wide variety of situations including giving a talk to local primary schools and various organisations such as rotary etc. where he received cheques on behalf of the branch. The branch believed that he had earned the honorary appointment of branch president in acknowledgement for his outstanding contribution over the years and as a way to maintain his excellent skills as an ambassador for both the Association and the branch.

Step 3: Applying to the Engagement Committee

The nomination form, guidance notes and confidential disclosure can be downloaded from the Volunteer Zone. You can also request electronic or hard copies from the Volunteering Team by calling 01604 611681 or emailing volunteering@mndassociation.org.

Once the completed nomination form and confidential disclosure have been successfully received, they will be sent to the Engagement Committee who will make a decision within 28 days. You will then be informed of the Engagement Committee's decision.

Once the Engagement Committee have approved the nomination, the Chief Executive will send a welcome letter to the new or returning President/Patron.

Step 4: They've said yes. Now what?

Remember that the person you are working with is likely to have a complex schedule and limited free time. They won't be able to attend frequent branch/group meetings and it is unwise to overload them with requests. Think carefully about where you are going to get the most out of their involvement. You might suggest they attend your AGM, or a major fundraiser, or even invite them to a support meeting to actually meet some people with MND and hear the issues for them directly.

Each individual will be different but here are some ideas on what patrons and presidents can do.

- Attend a fundraiser
- Speak at an event
- Give a quote to be used in a press release or to support a particular event.
- Act as a sounding board for you in their area of expertise
- Attend your AGM
- Introduce you to their contacts who might be helpful (this only usually happens once they have been involved with you for a while)

If you're going to ask them to speak at an event, offer to give them a written briefing in advance. Don't overload them with paperwork but try to put down a few key notes and messages. The information for journalists section on the website can be useful at: <https://www.mndassociation.org/app/uploads/2019/04/MND-Association-Guide-for-journalists.pdf>

Case study 3

The Cheshire Branch asked Lord Ashbrook to be their patron. He allowed them to use his stately home to hold a garden party for people with MND, their carers and other branch members, which was a very successful social event and a real treat for everyone. A reception was also hosted by Lord Ashbrook and attended by local dignitaries, which raised awareness both of those attending and via local press and magazine coverage and approximately £5,000.

The best way to manage the relationship

It is best to have just one person nominated as the point of contact to deal with a new president or patron. This ensures you look professional. Ask this person to keep notes of correspondence and contact that can be used to update the committee/planning group and so that a handover is easily managed if the contact person changes.

Make sure your key contact person is extremely efficient and organised. If the president or patron is attending an event it is important to ensure all the timings are clear and sent over to him/her in plenty of time. Make sure they are due to arrive in plenty of time, but equally don't have them hanging around while you are setting up.

Aim to be in contact with them several times a year, say every three or four months, but with purpose each time, not necessarily with an ask but with information on what has been happening with a campaign or a major development in research for example. Keep them informed and reminded of what your branch or group is doing by forwarding them your newsletter.

If you are going to invite them to open an event or attend a fundraiser try to give as much notice as possible –three months is usually ideal. Don't expect them to get back to you in the first few days after your request and don't re-approach for an answer until a reasonable amount of time has passed. This is where a good relationship with a PA or assistant can help. Aim to ideally have them involved in two events a year but don't be prescriptive. If they are busy it might be less than that, but one event that they help to make a success is worth it.

Risks

If you are working with someone in business or another field with a high-level position, there is always a chance that a 'crisis' may occur which prevents them attending an event they had already committed to. This is inevitably a huge blow but be gracious, it is something that comes with the territory. If it happens more than once though then this might be an indication of problems.

Step 5: Saying goodbye

In most cases the normal length of time for someone to take on the role of president or patron would be three years. At the end of this time if all has gone well and they wish to there may be no reason not to continue, but you will need to reapply to the Board of Trustees again and once agreed confirm in writing again to your patron or president clearly stating this is for a further three year period.

However, if there has not been any contact for some considerable time or any positive response to your asks and you suspect that the relationship has run its course then it may be time to draw things to a close. Write and let them know that their three-year term is due to come to an end and thank them for what they have done, their interest/involvement etc. If things start to go wrong some time before the end of the formal period you could send a letter saying that you realise that they have a number of commitments on their time and that you realise that they may have reached a point that they may no longer be able to take on the role of patron or president.

Like the end of all relationships things can sometimes be a little messy. If that provokes further silence then follow through with one more letter, recapping in the first letter and asking them to contact you by a certain date. If you don't hear back by then, it's time to move on.