



# B1: Developing your branch grantmaking policy and processes

## In this section:

- Branch grantmaking minimum standards**
- Your branch grantmaking policy**
- Considering grants**
- Payment of grants**
- The grants sub-committee**
- The role of the Support Volunteer**
- Application forms**
- Recording and reporting grant awards**

This section gives an overview of what you need to consider and put in place as a branch. It covers minimum standards for branches, developing grants policies and procedures, and the role of the grants sub-committee and **Support Volunteers**.

## Branch grantmaking minimum standards

To help branches to meet our grantmaking principles, all branches must adhere to the minimum standards listed below:

- All branches must develop a branch grantmaking policy and review it at least once a year
- All branches must form a grants sub-committee to consider requests
- All applications must be considered within four weeks
- All requests above £200 must be submitted on an MS Society grant application form
- All applications below £200 must be formally recorded in writing
- All branch grantmaking activity must be reported back to the MS National Centre in London, annually

## Your branch grantmaking policy

Your branch committee has a responsibility to ensure that branch funds are spent effectively and fairly, while respecting the confidentiality of applicants.

To do this, each branch must establish a clear and fair grants policy which can be made available to anyone who asks to see it.

**Top tip:** See [T1: Branch grantmaking policy guidance and template](#) for help putting your grantmaking policy together. The **Grants Team** and your **Local Networks Officer** are also available to help you develop or review your branch grants policy.

Contact details for staff referred to can be found in [Appendix 1: Sources of support](#). Job titles rather than names are used so that this publication doesn't date when somebody leaves their post.

Your branch grantmaking policy should be a shared document, developed and agreed by the full committee, for the grants sub-committee to work to. This enables the sub-committee to consider applications confidentially within an agreed framework, feeding back to the full committee anonymously. The importance of the branch policy is not solely the document which is produced, but the discussions you have had as a full branch committee to develop it.

**Top tip:** When developing your policy, take formal notes that you can refer to when you come to update your policy. You may have new committee members who weren't around when you drafted your policy last time.

Your policy must include:

- what your branch will and won't fund
- maximum grant limits
- how often someone can apply
- how your branch will deal with emergency grants
- how grants will be paid
- how often the sub-committee will meet
- details of how members will be elected to the grants sub-committee and how long they will stay in this role

Your committee should review your grantmaking policy on a regular basis, ideally every year. This means you will be able to react to changes in circumstances, for example receiving a large donation, or increased demand for grants beyond the branch's resources.

**Top tip:** The **Committee Handbook** is our key resource for branches. It includes guidance on MS Society strategy, policies and working practices as they apply to your branch. See [C3: Committee guidelines and meetings](#) for information on how to organise your branch committee and grants sub-committee.

**Top tip:** You can find a list of all volunteer website resources referred to in the **Support Grants Handbook** in [Appendix 2: Volunteer website resource index](#)

You'll also find the answers to common queries about grants in [Appendix 9: Grantmaking frequently asked questions](#)

## National guidelines - local circumstances

The branch policy must be based on national grantmaking policies but shaped to your local circumstances.

To ensure our grantmaking is as consistent as possible for people affected by MS we have developed a national approach. This includes the key principles and policies outlined in Part A, funding criteria (see Part C) and a list of eligible categories for the Individual Support Grants Fund (see [Appendix 6](#)).

However, local factors such as the demand for grants or other forms of support, and the amount of branch funding available will influence a branch's grantmaking policy and the range of items that you are able to fund. Your branch policy should reflect these factors.

### For example...

Branches in an area with a high number of people affected by MS, and therefore a high demand on branch resources, might set a policy that limits support to one grant per person every two years. This means they can offer grants to more people. But this limit may be one grant per person per year in an area with a lower number of people affected by MS, where demand is less. The national limit is one grant per applicant every two years for Individual Support Grants due to the high level of demand we receive.

Similarly, branches may use their policy to decide a set grant amount, or maximum amounts they would offer. Some branches follow the upper limits used by the **Grants Team** for their grant awards, but for a branch with low reserves, these amounts are likely to be too much and they would need to set their own reduced limits.

## Considering grants

For Individual Support Grants, there is a list of broad grant categories, with upper grant limits for each, reviewed by the **Grants Team** annually. We also have guidance about requests that cannot be considered under the Individual Support Grants fund (see [Appendix 6: Individual Support Grant categories and upper limits](#) and [Appendix 7: Requests we cannot fund](#)). We suggest you use these as a basis for your own policies, adjusting the grant limits in line with your resources. Branches

have discretion to consider other requests, as long as they meet the criteria set out in [C1: The Individual Support Grant Fund](#).

## Emergency grants

Although emergency grants cannot be considered from national funds, branches have the flexibility and local contacts to be able to consider grants to help prevent or deal with a crisis. This may include short term living expenses or one-off care support in an emergency, where there is a direct threat to health or safety and no statutory funding is immediately available.

Many branch committees have used their grantmaking policy to allow their **Lead Support Volunteer** to award small emergency grants to an agreed amount without the need to approach another committee member. This is only advisable for **Support Volunteers** who have plenty of experience of the type of requests for help that they receive. This could perhaps be applied after serving as **Support Volunteer** for one year and should be reviewed regularly by the full committee.

## Payment of grants

Each **Branch Treasurer** must keep adequate records of payment for audit purposes and at some point will need to know the identity of the beneficiary. For more on recording grants, see [Treasurers' Handbook section 8: Accounting guidance](#).

**Find out more**

You can also find our full **Treasurers' Handbook**:

- on our **volunteer website**, <http://volunteers.mssociety.org.uk/our-treasurers-handbook>
- by requesting a printed copy from the **Volunteering Team**

Branches should ideally make payments to the suppliers of the item or service supported through a grant. However, many suppliers have stopped accepting cheques and the best prices are often online so payments can only be made by card.

If a supplier does not accept cheques, you may be able to buy vouchers for the grant recipient to use - you will need to ask for a copy of their receipt once they have purchased the item.

In some cases the only option is to pay the applicant. Ideally in this situation the person would pay for the item themselves (after the grant has been agreed), forward a copy of their receipt and then the branch would reimburse them by cheque. If the person does not have the funds to pay and needs to be paid the grant first, you can pay the person. However you must make sure that you get receipts for the item as soon as possible. They must be told that if they do not provide receipts this may affect future applications to the MS Society.

You should never order an item directly for a grant recipient. To do this means that you enter into a contractual relationship with the provider. This could be problematic for the branch and grant recipient if the equipment should prove to be faulty. Ask the

grant recipient to place the order and then pay against the order, making sure that any invoices show the grant recipient as the customer.

## The grants sub-committee

For reasons of confidentiality, it is not appropriate to consider applications in full branch committee meetings. Branch committee members may know applicants and in turn, those needing help may be put off if they have to approach people they know.

Individual branch volunteers should not make decisions on grant applications alone, except in exceptional circumstances (see **Emergency grants** above). Branches need to ensure that they are paying care and attention to their duty of care over MS Society resources. Regardless of how efficient and conscientious the **Support Volunteer** may be, unless other volunteers are involved in the decision-making, the branch will not be in a position to do this effectively. Branch volunteers have a collective responsibility to account for the proper use of branch funds.

Forming a grants sub-committee allows the branch to consider applications confidentially but still collectively, in line with a grant policy which has previously been approved by the full branch committee. The grants sub-committee must report back to the full branch committee with brief anonymised details of grants made.

The membership of the grants sub-committee is at the full committee's discretion, but we suggest that it contains three people, ideally a branch **Support Volunteer**, the **Treasurer** and one other - this will therefore usually include a cheque signatory.

The sub-committee should meet to consider applications regularly or when necessary, to make sure all requests are considered within four weeks. With three people it should be fairly easy to come together at short notice or contact one another by phone or email, providing a fast service to grant applicants.

## The role of the Support Volunteer

As well as providing general support for people with MS in the local area, the role of the **Support Volunteer** is essential to local grantmaking. All requests for help should be dealt with by a member of your branch support team.

**Find out  
more**

Our **Support Volunteers** provide safe, consistent, high quality support to people with and affected by MS. Find out more:

- on our **volunteer website**,  
<http://volunteers.mssociety.org.uk/offering-support-people-affected-ms>
- by contacting your **Local Networks Officer**

The **Support Volunteer's** duties will include some or all of the following:

- Giving out grant application forms (although these may sometimes be issued by the **Grants Team** or others)
- Helping people with MS to complete their application form. Some form of contact should be made with all applicants, either by phone or in person. If you have enough **Support Volunteers** to help manage the workload, you may find it useful to split the branch into a number of areas each covered by a different volunteer. They will then be in a position to support each other's work and provide cover during times of holiday or illness.

### Visiting applicants

Often **Support Volunteers** will visit applicants to help them fill in our grant application form. As well as saving time, this can ensure the necessary information is included. When meeting and visiting applicants in their homes it's really important that you consider how to keep yourself and others safe. It's unlikely that anything will happen, but taking some simple precautions is a good idea. See [Appendix 5: Working safely](#) for ways to stay safe when offering support.

- Answering questions on the application process for the applicant, including possible sources of local funding
- Telling people the outcome of the branch's decision about their application.

### Sharing the outcome

Understandably, people want to know as soon as possible whether their grant has been approved, but it can be stressful for **Support Volunteers** to have to give unwelcome news. We recommend your branch only informs applicants in writing (unless in emergency situations) but even if you do call an applicant, you should always follow this up in writing.

If a request is declined, it is good practice to let the applicant know how the decision was reached. Every possible action should be taken to minimise the stress that applicants might experience, and if they can understand the reasoning behind a decision not to fund a request, they are more often able to accept it.

See [T5: Grantmaking letter templates](#) a range of templates you can personalise to keep people informed throughout the application process. Copy the appropriate letter text onto your [MS Society branch letter template](#) before sending:

- Application form covering letter
- Letter to inform applicant their request has been sent to the Grants Team

- Letter to inform applicant of branch grant award, with payment to a supplier
- Letter to inform applicant of branch grant award, with payment to the applicant
- Letter to inform applicant their request has been part funded
- Letter to inform applicant their request has been declined

## Application forms

All branches should have a supply of Individual Support Grant Fund, Short Breaks and Activities Fund and Carers Grant Fund application forms to send to potential grant applicants and other enquirers.

**Top tip:** Copies of application forms are available from the **Grants Team** or you can download them from the **volunteer website**:

- [Individual Support Grant application form](#)
- [Short Breaks and Activities Fund application form](#)
- [Carers Grant Fund application form](#)

We are sometimes asked why we request so much information on our application form. As well as seeking specific information to assist the branch and the **Grants Team** to consider the application, the form also contains sections which may help us to find other sources of funding, enabling our resources to go further and help more people with MS

**Top tip:** See [B2: Funding branch grantmaking](#) for more on additional sources of funding you may be able to apply for.

Branches must ask applicants to complete application forms for all requests over £200. For requests lower than £200 (with the exception of emergency grants) the request must still be considered by the grants sub-committee and like emergency grants, the key details of the request must be recorded in writing. These are:

- name, address and contact details
- confirmation of MS diagnosis
- what the request was
- reference to any other grants made to this applicant by the branch
- confirmation that the applicant does not have savings of more than £16,000 (£23,000 for Short Breaks and Activities or adult Carers Grants)



**Top tip:** Use [T3: Record of emergency grants and requests under £200 template](#) to record this information.

## Recording and reporting grant awards

The grants sub-committee must keep a record of all grant decisions, including grants awarded and any requests that you have turned down.

It is important that your grants sub-committee reports back to the full branch committee regularly, usually monthly, however the reports should not reveal an applicant's identity and must only outline the brief details of the request and the amount awarded. By outlining only the key information in this way only a small number of sub-committee members have access to an applicant's personal information, including their level of need and their income and expenditure and savings.

### For example...

The sub-committee could report that three grants have been made in the last two months as follows:

- **Applicant 1** was awarded £500 toward a wheelchair with a total cost of £2,000. Family and friends contributed the remaining £1,500.
- **Applicant 2** was awarded £370 for a riser recliner chair costing £1,070. A supplementary Individual Support Grant from the **Grants Team** awarded £300 and the applicant was able to find the remaining £400 herself.
- **Applicant 3** was awarded £800 toward home adaptations. The national Individual Support Grant fund awarded £2,000 and the applicant was also in receipt of a Disabled Facilities Grant of £16,500.

**Top tip:** Use [T2: Grantmaking report to full committee template](#) to put your report together.

## Storing grants paperwork

Records of grants made and any personal information regarding the applicant must be kept for six years, in case it is requested by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Following this time, all identifiable information should be destroyed in a secure way.



## Branch pro forma

Branch grantmaking must be reported back to the MS National Centre annually, and we send out a simple form to collect this information, which can be completed on paper or electronically. See [T4: Branch grantmaking pro forma template](#) for a copy of this form.

By providing us with this summary of branch grantmaking, you will give us a comprehensive breakdown of how the funds raised by branches are being spent and we will be able to report on any trends that develop over the years. This information will be used to improve the support we offer for people affected by MS, including our fundraising.

**Top tip:** Rather than waiting until the end of January to complete this form, update it throughout the year. That way, you won't have so much to do all in one go.

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