

Running Effective Meetings

Why do groups need to run effective meetings?

Meetings are an integral, and unavoidable, part of the work of most community groups. There must be few people in the community and voluntary sectors who can't tell a story about the time they attended a meeting that was poorly managed and the effects this had on them. Those of us who have the time or desire to attend meetings for their own sakes are few and far between. No one wants to feel that their time is being wasted and their contribution not valued, or become frustrated at endless hours of unproductive discussion.

So what makes an effective meeting?

- Committee members need to be clear about the purpose of the meeting – a detailed agenda (see example below) can help with this.
- It completes its business and achieves the necessary results within the allotted timescale.
- A proper record of the meeting is produced, covering the areas discussed and decisions made (see section on **Minutes** below).
- Giving members sufficient opportunity to read all the relevant paperwork – if these cannot be circulated in advance, then allow reading time within the meeting.
- Meetings need to be chaired efficiently (see **The Role of a Committee** Guide). This means listening, controlling the discussion without monopolising it, and summarising where the discussion is up to, decisions made and action points arising from decisions.
- Everyone should have the chance to make a contribution and put their views forward to the meeting. Don't forget that there will always be people who will need to be encouraged to participate. Equally there will also be members who will over-compensate for others' non-participation by dominating the meeting!
- The physical arrangements for the meeting need to be considered in advance.
 - Are meetings held in a welcoming and physically accessible venue – one where the business can be conducted without interruptions?
 - Does the timing of meetings take into account other people's commitments?
 - Have you asked members about the most convenient time (day/night) to hold meetings?
 - Will people be made a drink on arrival or will there be a coffee break?
 - Do some members have difficulty with transport or need seeing home if it's an evening meeting?
 - Are there any cultural issues that you need to take into account?
- Being clear about the contributions to be made by observers, visitors and external speakers.

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- Don't forget that just because a meeting is effective doesn't mean it can't also be fun. You need to remember people's motivation for getting involved in community groups in the first place. Many new people want to extend their social networks, make new friends etc. Allow time for socialising, catching up and sharing information.

As noted above effective meetings are structured by a clear agenda.

Preparing agendas

A standard **agenda** for a typical community group meeting will most probably include the following items:

- Name of organisation, the date, time and place of the meeting
- Welcome, introductions and apologies
- Minutes of last meeting
- Matters arising, not covered elsewhere on the agenda
- Update on activities
- Update on membership
- Publicity and promotion
- Treasurer's report
- Funding and fundraising
- Any other business
- Date of next meeting

The meeting will close at (insert time).

You would then need to add any other activities or issues that need discussing at particular meetings or times of year, or contributions from external speakers. If a guest or speaker is attending the meeting then slot them into the early stages of the meeting, so that any confidential committee business can be dealt with after they have left.

Minutes of meetings

Minutes are a written record of what has happened at a meeting and are a useful source of information, both for those at the meeting and for those people unable to attend.

Minutes need to be clear about the main points of discussion, should record decisions made, and what needs to be done as a result of decisions (actions) and by whom. They also need to record who was present (including any people who attend as observers), and any apologies for absence.

There are no hard and fast rules about how long minutes should be or what amount of detail should be covered. New secretaries often find that they gradually get a feel for recording the content of meetings and develop their own style. It is more important to listen and note down key words and phrases than attempt to take down exactly what is said. One copy of each set of minutes should be kept in a central file or minutes folder.

Ground rules for effective meetings

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It is definitely worth taking the time to set out ground rules for conducting meetings. They can provide a positive means of avoiding possible future conflict amongst committee members, and make it clear to people what sort of behaviour is acceptable – and what is definitely unacceptable. Ground rules should be agreed by committee members upon starting out, and should be revisited annually or when a number of new people join the committee. The following are suggestions of items that you might want to cover.

- *Time will be allocated to discuss items and an overall time will be set to complete the business of the meeting*
- *There will be no interrupting and members will listen to each other*
- *Members will be open to new ideas, different contributions and different ways of looking at issues*
- *Everyone shall be welcomed and introduced*
- *Every committee member has the right:*
 - *to state their opinions and put forward suggestions, and have these opinions and suggestions listened and responded to*
 - *to disagree with other's points of view*
 - *to make contributions without being interrupted*
 - *not to be subjected to offensive or inappropriate language*
 - *not to be excluded by the use of jargon*
 - *to understand what is being discussed.*

*For further advice on **Running Effective Meetings** contact:
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