

Getting involved: running a productive committee meeting

Productive meetings are vital to the effective functioning of any committee and its ability to carry out its role. They are the means by which the Committee exercises its collective responsibility and fulfils its purpose.

Meetings are a place for:

- decision making
- reporting
- review
- problem solving
- discussion

In reality running purposeful and engaging meetings can be challenging. Common experiences include:

- long discussions with no conclusion
- decision making on the basis of inadequate information
- low attendance
- uneven participation
- no time or space to ask questions
- poor time management
- members are not able to put items onto the agenda

These issues are not easily addressed, but meetings can become more effective if they are well planned with a clear purpose, effectively chaired and focused on decision-making.

Plan your meetings

Meetings are more productive if they are planned beforehand. The responsibility for planning the meeting generally lies with the Chairperson along with the Secretary and/or staff member who coordinates the committee.

However all committee members will need to ensure that they have read any papers prior to the meeting, noted any questions and, if appropriate, have added relevant items to the agenda.

Plan your meetings effectively by:

- Setting dates well in advance to maximise the number of members available to attend (don't forget to send out a reminder notice)
- Clarifying the purpose or focus of the meeting
- Ensuring that staff and financial reports are concise and comprehensible
- Ensuring that minutes and agreed actions from the previous meetings are circulated
- Ensuring that all papers are circulated well in advance
- Finalising the meeting agenda in advance
- Identifying which agenda items require a decision and which are for information or discussion

Planning your Management Committee meetings will be easier if the purpose of each meeting is clear. A well planned agenda should clearly communicate the purpose and objectives of the meeting.

Effective chairing

Chairing is a key factor in the effectiveness of meetings. The role of the Chair is to direct discussion, ensure that the objectives of the meeting are met, and that the Committee effectively fulfils its responsibility in consideration of the items on the agenda. This involves ensuring that you are well briefed about each agenda item and that:

- decisions are taken, recorded and carried out
- the organisation's policies are applied
- there is full participation
- the agenda is followed
- there are time limits for the meeting as a whole and for agenda items

Productive meetings require the contribution of all members of the committee, working as a team and taking joint responsibility for ensuring that issues are given due consideration and decisions taken.

It is essential that a Chair is appointed not just because of their status within an organisation but because they have the right skills and experience to chair effectively.

Decision making

Committees are responsible for strategic decisions and recommendations and need to take decisions jointly with other members. In making any decision, a number of steps are involved, including some or all of the following:

Information - ensuring the committee has read or heard all relevant information

The goal - what is our aim and is it consistent with the aim and direction of the organisation? Agreement on the goal is a crucial stage in decision making.

Choices - what choices are available to us and what are the constraints?

The plan - how do we achieve our goal and what are the steps and what resources will we need to do so?

Decision making is much more effective if the committee establishes not only what is to be done but also how and when it will be done and by whom.

There are two common methods of making decisions, either by consensus or by taking a vote. Some organisations have a strong commitment to consensual decision making and only take a vote in exceptional circumstances. Others routinely vote on issues. Your committee's terms of reference should clearly describe the decision making process.

Regardless of how decisions are taken, all committee members should be clear about exactly what has been decided and decisions should be clearly minuted.

Effective meeting minutes

Minutes capture the essential information of a meeting – decisions and assigned actions. They keep committee members on track by reminding them of their role and clearly record what happened in a meeting.

Minutes shouldn't be an elaborate recording of everything that happened during a meeting. Minutes are meant to record basic information such as the actions assigned and decisions made. They can be saved and used for reference or background material for future meetings.

Don't try to record notes verbatim – it's not necessary. Minutes are meant to give an outline of what happened in the meeting, not a record of who said what. Focus on understanding what's being discussed and on recording what's been assigned or decided on.

Minutes should always include the following information:

- The date and time of the meeting
- The purpose of the meeting
- The names of the attendees and apologies
- The meeting lead or chair's name
- Assigned action items
- Decisions made

Minutes taken at one meeting should be sent out to all attendees prior to the next meeting. They should be tabled for verification and amended if necessary at the beginning of the committee's next meeting.