

2. Running your organisation

2.3 Effective meetings

Having an effective agenda and a clear record of your meetings are key to the smooth running of your committee meetings and the active involvement of your committee members.

An effective agenda

The agenda provides a framework for the meeting. It is also a plan and a resource and gives meetings a focus and a sense of direction. Clearly, it is well worth putting time and energy into getting it right.

Planning the agenda

Make sure you have:

- Checked with all the key people - the chair, secretary, treasurer, sub-committee chairs, key staff and anyone else who might have something to put on the agenda. Make it clear to everyone how to get their items on the agenda and who to contact. Produce a pro forma for this purpose.
- Gone through the minutes of the last two or three meetings to find any items that need to be put forward or reviewed as agenda items in their own right. Keep 'Matters Arising' for items requiring brief and straightforward feedback.
- Checked the organisation's strategic and business plans to find out whether this meeting has to deal with any recurrent business such as financial reports or the AGM.
- Prepared papers needed for agenda items and got them ready for circulation. Make it clear on the agenda if papers are being sent out or are to be tabled (i.e. presented at the meeting).
- Sent the agenda out sufficiently in advance as a means of reminding people of the meeting and giving them time to prepare for it.

Ordering the agenda

Make sure you have:

- Put the agenda items in a logical order. For example, decisions to spend money should not come before the financial report!
- Put the agenda items in a helpful order and one that suits your committee. This usually means that substantial items are dealt with first and quick ones later. Alternatively, it can be helpful to alternate big and small items.

Meeting information

Make sure the agenda contains:

- The name of your organisation, group and/or committee.
- The day and date of the meeting.
- The starting time (and ideally, the finishing time too). Venue details, if necessary including room number, travel instructions by car, details of public transport and information about car parking.
- Details about access and facilities for people with disabilities.
- Details of crèche or other services.
- Details of who the chair and minute taker will be if these roles rotate.

Agenda beginnings

It should start with the necessary openers:

- Apologies for absence.
- Welcome, and introduction of guests.
- Agenda review (very brief overview of the purpose of this meeting and/or the main items to be discussed).
- Minutes of the previous meeting (to agree whether they are a true record).
- Correspondence Information (if it is felt to be appropriate).
- Matters arising from the minutes and not elsewhere on the agenda.

Agenda items

You should:

- Give enough information for people to know what the items are about – single words or phrases is rarely enough information.
- Indicate who will introduce each item (make sure they know in advance!).
- Specify what the purpose of each item is. For example,
 - To give information
 - For discussion
 - To solve a problem
 - To approve something such as the minutes of the last meeting
 - To decide a course of action
 - To report back on action taken
- Indicate whether papers have been sent previously, or will be available at the meeting.
- Indicate how much time has been allocated to the item if this works for your committee.

Endings

Include:

- 'Date, time and venue for next meeting' as the second last item.

- 'Any Other Business' as the last item. As a general rule items taken under AOB should be genuinely urgent or brief and for information only, and the chairperson should be consulted before including them.

Effective minutes

Having a clear record of your committee meetings (known as Minutes) is also important because they are:

- An agreed record of the decisions made by a meeting. They have legal status as documentary proof that decisions were made and in the right way.
- A reminder of action that people have agreed to take, or a means of checking whether an agreed action has been taken.
- A source of information for people who were not at the meeting.

Role of the minute taker

As well as producing a record of the meetings, normally the minute taker also has to:

- Be well prepared for the meeting – for example, know the agenda, bring the minutes of the last meeting for signing as a true record, record attendance at the meeting and organise travel expense forms.
- Know the organisation's constitution and standing orders, e.g., to be aware of when a meeting is quorate.
- Plan ahead, e.g. a schedule of future meetings.
- Liaise with the chairperson and develop a good working relationship with them.

Taking the minutes

Taking the minutes itself is normally done in two parts – taking notes during the meeting followed by writing up the minutes in a finished form after the meeting.

Some tips for taking notes during the meeting

- Listen more than you write! Follow the meaning not just the words.
- Summarise - practise listening for between 5 and 10 minutes and then writing a 30 word summary of the discussion so far in 60 seconds.
- Use a pro-forma that you can slot your notes into.
- Use symbols and abbreviations of your own.
- Use a star or red pen to note action points.
- Do not hesitate to check that you have understood the points being made!

Some tips for writing the finished minutes

- Remember the ABC of minute writing – be Accurate, Brief and Clear.
- If you need to use jargon, give an explanation.

- Write in short sentences and adopt the rule, one idea per sentence.
- Keep your paragraphs reasonably short – one paragraph per topic or per approach.
- Write impersonally, e.g. 'The meeting noted the information provided'.
- Use the passive case, e.g. 'It was decided' rather than 'We decided'
- Use bullet points for lists.
- End each minute with a decision and an action.

Adopt a clear structure for writing your minutes:

- Have a helpful heading, normally the same as shown on the agenda.
- Set the scene – who presented and whether it involved a proposal or report.
- What happened next in general terms – discussion, questions?
- If it's a report, did additional information emerge in response to questions? If it's a proposal, summarise the arguments for and against.
- What were the decisions and do the reasons for the decisions need to be recorded?
 - Who has to take action, what must they do and by when?

What minutes need to contain

- Name of the organisation.
- Description of the meeting.
- Date.
- Place.
- Members present.
- Other people present.
- Who chaired and took minutes.
- Apologies.
- Corrections if any to minutes of previous meeting.
- Record that minutes of previous meeting have been signed as a true record (corrected if appropriate).
- Matters arising.
- Separate minute for each agenda item.
- Date, time and place of next meeting.
- Minutes of Any Other Business.

Further information

Charity Commission for England and Wales

Tel: 0845 3000 218

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission>

Companies House

Tel: 0303 1234 500

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house>

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For further information contact

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