

Making meetings more effective

Introduction

"Why do we need to have meetings?" is often a comment heard in the voluntary sector. These are the main reasons for meetings:

- To discuss
- To inform
- To make decisions

- To ratify (confirm) decisions made by others (e.g. a sub-committee)
- To review previous decisions

In other words, **don't** have meetings just for the sake of it - they should have some clear purpose.

Setting an agenda

Meetings need a structure, even if they are relatively informal, so producing and issuing an agenda beforehand helps attendees focus on the issues that need to be discussed. Allow a few minutes before the meeting for social chat, then call committee members to order and follow the predetermined agenda for the meeting itself. Work your way through it, item by item, then people can socialise again at the end, if they wish.

Some typical items to include on an agenda might include:

Apologies for absence

So that a note can be kept of who wasn't there and why. If someone repeatedly fails to attend meetings without good reason, question whether they should continue. If you are a committee member but don't attend meetings, you cannot be fulfilling your role effectively. In charities which are also limited companies, it is against company law to miss more than a certain number of meetings a year and you may be automatically dismissed.

Minutes of last meeting

To allow for corrections, so the chair may sign off the minutes as a true record of what took place, to be kept on file for future reference.

Matters arising from minutes of last meeting

Reports on actions which people undertook to carry out by this meeting (unless the same subject is also

on the agenda for this meeting, when it should be reported under that item).

Regular reports

(e.g. Chair, Treasurer, Secretary, Staff) Any reports which are delivered on a regular basis. As a minimum, the Treasurer should report briefly on the current financial situation, the Chair or Secretary should report on any events or correspondence and the senior employee (in a staffed organisation) should report on any minor issues not covered elsewhere in the agenda.

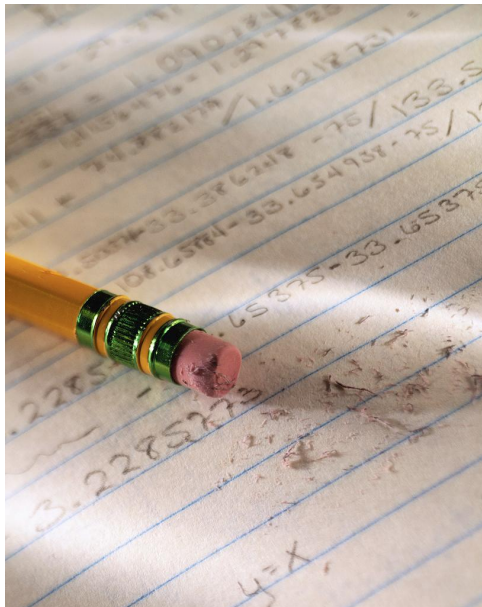
Items for discussion at this meeting

Which should have been communicated to the Chair or Secretary in advance. Remember there's no rule that says you have to discuss every single thing anyone suggests – if there's too much for one meeting, hold some items over till the next one, or refer them

to a sub-committee to discuss and report back to the main committee.

Any Other Business

This should be limited to minor items of information only. Major items for discussion should **NOT** be brought up under Any Other Business. If there is some burning issue which has arisen at the last minute, the Chair should be informed before the meeting starts and a decision taken as to whether it should be added to the main agenda. This might



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involve deciding to defer another item to the next meeting to make room for it.

Date of next meeting

Just so everybody knows and can't say they weren't

told about it! This will obviously be included in the minutes of the meeting as well, for the benefit of anyone not present at this meeting.

The role of the Chair

Many people worry that they can't chair a meeting effectively. We're not all born with a natural air of authority, so here are a few basic tips to help you:

The commonest complaint in voluntary sector committees is always, "Our meetings just go on and on and never seem to get anywhere." This is the Chair's responsibility. **Make sure meetings run to time** and ask the meeting to **reach decisions** (even if the decision is to do nothing, or to defer a decision to another time). The Secretary can back the chair up in this by summarising the discussion from their notes.

Stick to the agenda

If it isn't on the agenda, don't discuss it! Don't be browbeaten by the person who demands an immediate debate on some side issue. Defer it to another meeting. As suggested above, if an urgent extra item needs to be discussed, space should be found in the main agenda, with the agreement of the whole meeting.

Set a time limit

Decide how long the meeting will last and stick to it. Don't put more items on the agenda than can sensibly be covered in one to one and a half hours. If it takes less time than that, finish early! No meeting should ever go on for more than two hours, as by that time everyone will be thoroughly fed up and discussions will be going round in circles. Remember, in the voluntary sector people are giving up their free time – don't abuse that privilege by making them sit for hours listening to waffle.

Divide up the agenda into time slots

Allow say 10-15 minutes maximum for discussion on each main agenda item. At the end of that time, the Chair should summarise where the discussion has got to (with the Secretary's help if necessary) and ask the meeting for a decision. If no decision is forthcoming, don't go on beating the topic to death in the hope of wringing a decision out of it! If it is obvious that further information or a much longer discussion is required, then either refer the subject to a sub-committee, to make recommendations, or set another meeting with that subject as its only agenda item.

Ratifying decisions / recommendations

If an item has previously been referred to a sub-committee, then the main committee should normally accept their recommendations, unless there is some glaring reason not to. The whole point of using sub-committees is to avoid lengthy debates on complex issues in the main committee. If the sub-committee has done its job properly, they will have taken all the relevant factors into account. This is why sub-committees should be made up of those people best qualified to look at that particular issue. The Chair may allow questions to members of the sub-committee but must avoid allowing the debate to start all over again, as the main committee may not have access to all the details.

So to sum up

Keep to the agenda. Allow a set time for each item, then summarise and ask for a decision. Don't allow discussions to go off the point or round in circles. Don't allow individuals to dominate the discussion or use their personality to overcome legitimate concerns or opposition. Draw out everybody's opinion.

This fact sheet is one of a series of fact sheets produced by High Peak CVS. **They can all be downloaded from our website www.highpeakcvs.org.uk/how**

High Peak CVS works to ensure that local voluntary and community groups can access as much support, advice and information as possible. We help groups in many different areas, such as funding, charity registration,

practical services including printing, training and links to training and with legal issues. We have resources, including a meeting room, computers and OHP for use by groups.

To find out how we can help your group, please contact us on 01663 735 350 or email



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