

Minutes not Hours!

- help for committee secretaries

Introduction

Minutes are an essential part of meetings – they record the decisions made at a meeting and who was supposed to do what before the next one. Too often people come away after a long and stressful meeting with no clear memory of what was agreed. This then causes problems because people have different recollections of what was decided. Either two people try and do the same thing in different ways, or each thinks the other was supposed to it and the job doesn't get done at all.

The most common fault with minutes is they are too long. It is not necessary to record everything that was said, like Hansard, the journal of the House of Commons, where every single word is precisely written down. The other fault is they are too short – they don't tell you enough about what went on or what was decided. Minutes should give enough sense of what was discussed so that a committee member who could not attend can understand what happened.

The happy medium?

It depends on the meeting or organisation. A small informal voluntary group needs only to record:

- that a subject was discussed,
- what the decision was
- who was going to act on it.

A larger group dealing with more formal matters may require a bit more detail, such as recording the different points of view that were expressed. Sometimes a member will remain opposed to a decision even if outvoted and will ask for their opposition to be recorded, along the lines of, "Councillor Bloggsworthy requested that his position on the matter ("Over my dead body") be formally recorded in the minutes." This is particularly important for formally structured groups such as charitable companies limited by guarantee where specific procedures must be followed or a decision could later be challenged as invalid.

Minutes must provide a fair and accurate summary of what happened at the meeting. This should include who was there and who sent their apologies. This will confirm whether the meeting was quorate - the minimum number of members required by the constitution were in attendance.

If the quorum situation changes during the meeting ("Councillor Bloggsworthy left the meeting at 7.00pm") meaning there is no longer a quorum, then binding decisions cannot be made after that point, so items may be discussed but a decision must be deferred to another meeting. In such situations it may

be better to adjourn the meeting in order to avoid repeating a discussion. ("The meeting being no longer quorate it was decided to adjourn to the Nag's Head. Meeting Closed 7.05pm.")

The minutes should follow the order of points on the agenda. It is sometimes helpful to leave a space in your notes between points in case somebody returns to that item later in the discussion. ("A thought's just struck me – why don't we do this instead?")

The chair can help the minute-taker by summarising a discussion before a vote is taken and asking members if that is a fair summary.

Minutes should be written up from notes as soon as possible after the meeting while memory is still fresh and sent out straight away. Don't wait until the agenda for the next meeting goes out to send them, particularly if there are action points to be followed up. It is good practice for a draft of the minutes to be checked by the chairperson.

At the next meeting the chair should request any corrections to the minutes of the previous meeting and these should be recorded. A complete set of minutes should be kept in a folder by the secretary, with each set signed by the chair to show they have been approved.