Volunteering

in the 21st Century



Running effective meetings

We should never underestimate the importance of conducting a good meeting. When you join a community group and especially when you join a committee, a great deal of time and energy is expended in meetings. These are critical times for making decisions, undertaking plans, considering proposals and discussing the next steps and direction of your community groups.

A good meeting is one where the purpose and desired outcomes are known and shared by all participants and where participants are provided reports and information well in advance. A good meeting has a strong chair who will ensure that everyone's contributions are heard and valued and that only matters relevant to the meeting's purpose are discussed. A good meeting is supported by a clear agenda and documented minutes which record prescribed actions and decisions made. A good meeting is focussed, timely and leaves participants with a sense of having achieved something and a clear understanding of what next steps are required.

Purpose of meeting

Participants need to acquaint themselves with the main purpose of their meetings and what it is they are trying to achieve. Meetings allow all participants to share their opinions on agenda items. Consequently, meeting agendas should only contain items that require meaningful input.

Leadership

A skilful chair is able to facilitate the meeting so that participants enjoy themselves and still achieve significant outcomes. A chairperson should be sensitive to interpersonal dynamics and ensure discussion remains focussed and constructive. Issues which may arise between individuals should be addressed outside a committee meeting.

Meeting preparation

Background papers need to be circulated well before the meeting to allow people to read and reflect on their positions on the presented issues. The papers need to include any reports and the agenda, which clearly states the purpose of the meeting and the expected outcomes of each agenda item.

The agenda

The Agenda is a tool that provides a structure for the work that the organisation needs to attend to at any particular meeting. The Agenda is a crucial part of the process for your organisation to get things done.

Items for discussion are given a priority and a time allowance to allow for the group to 'Introduce, Discuss and Decide' on general business of the organisation and issues of importance. The Agenda is usually set by the Chair in collaboration with the Secretary and sent out to committee members at least one week prior to the meeting.

Meeting checklist

- 1. Every meeting requires a specific purpose and outcome.
- 2. All people involved with a meeting agree that the meeting is necessary.
- 3. People whose attendance is necessary for the meeting's success must be available.
- 4. The purpose, venue, time to start and finish, procedure and desired outcomes should be circulated before the meeting.
- 5. All information relevant to the purpose of the meeting should be made available in time to be read before the meeting begins.
- 6. The agenda should be read out and agreed to and the duration of the meeting confirmed at the start of the meeting.
- 7. A chairperson and minute taker need to be appointed.
- 8. When a decision is made, it needs to be minuted clearly and read back to the meeting.
- Each decision ideally includes actions required, person responsible for each action, timeline for actions, how and when a report back to the group will occur.



At the meeting

Structure the meeting and agenda so that participants deal with the most important matters first. This will encourage them to turn up on time. Estimate how long each agenda item will take and put the planned timing on the agenda. Ask a participant to keep track of time so that all agenda items are covered in the meeting with sufficient time for focused and informed discussion.

Accurate minutes should record the ideas generated and the decisions made during the meeting. Most importantly, the minutes need to indicate who has agreed to do what before the next meeting or by when. This is often recorded as an "Action" item. At the end of the meeting, participants need to review each agenda item and confirm who is responsible for what. The minutes should be written and circulated while the meeting details are still fresh in people's minds, preferably within a week of the meeting being held.

Minute taking

Minutes are an official record of what took place at a meeting. For meetings such as the Annual General Meeting (AGM) or Committee of Management meetings, they are a legal record. Minutes are taken at a meeting in order to give those who were present, and those who didn't attend, a clear, brief and accurate record of what took place and the decisions that were reached. Groups should be clear and consistent in procedures for determining who receives the minutes, when and how. Minutes should always be approved by the Chair before being circulated.

What should be in the minutes?

The key things to record are:

- The name of the meeting, date/time, location, a list of those present, and apologies
- What was discussed and reported

- What motions were put forward
- What was decided and why
- What action is to be taken, when, and by whom

The amount of detail to include in the minutes will depend on the type of meeting it is and what the participants will need to know. Sometimes a very simple record will be sufficient; other times it will be necessary to include more detail of discussions and points raised. It is important to make sure that each committee member is happy with the way minutes are presented.

There are no hard and fast rules for what to include, but here are some tips:

- Ask yourself "If I wasn't present, what would I want or need to know?"
- Remember that people will rely on the minutes to remind them what decisions were reached and what they were expected to do following the meeting.
- Be clear, brief, accurate and neutral. Minutes may become publically available so avoid personal comment or discussion.
- Be consistent with detail.

After the meeting

Minutes are a legal record of your meeting. They need to be printed (if taken electronically), accepted and signed by the Chair prior to the next meeting, and kept securely.

- Write up the minutes from your notes as soon as possible afterwards
- Make sure you clear the minutes with the Chair before circulating them
- Attach any reports or papers as appropriate
- Use the minutes as the basis for the next agenda (with the Chair)
- Although the details of minutes can vary, the actual format is quite standard. The minutes should also correspond with the agenda.