

Planning and Holding Meetings

Think about all the different kinds of meetings you have been to or heard about. These might include:

- a management committee meeting
- a public meeting
- an Annual General Meeting
- an informal discussion

These are held for very different purposes and would therefore be managed in different ways. How a meeting is run changes the way people speak to each other (formally or informally) or the way that meetings are recorded (jotted notes or formal minutes).

1: The management committee meeting

- Ensure all the relevant papers (such as minutes of the last meeting, agenda for the coming meeting, etc.) have been circulated. This is especially important when there are complex issues to discuss. People need to have time to read and understand the information before making a decision based on it.
- The chair must keep control of the meeting, allowing equal participation by everyone and avoiding a situation where one person takes over.
- Having an agenda means that you'll cover all the issues, and means that you will manage the time better. Although some committee members like talking for hours, most just want to get the work done!
- Taking minutes is no-one's favourite job, but a clear record of decisions taken is vital. Before you start the meeting, the minute taker needs to be clear about the level of detail needed - should all discussion be recorded or just the outcomes of the discussion? Should comments be attributed to named individuals or not? Remember minutes must be impartial and factual. For each item on the agenda, the minutes should include any decision reached, action required, who will take the action and a deadline. You should keep a Minutes Book as a log of all meetings. Checking and agreeing minutes at the beginning of the next meeting is therefore vital in order to avoid later disagreements.

2: The public meeting

Public meetings are held for many reasons, usually either to inform or consult (or both). For example, a public meeting might:

- Ask local people what they think about plans for a community building
- Gauge opinion on the setting up of a new community association

Some things you need to think carefully about would include:

The Venue

Somewhere that people know well and are comfortable visiting (and that you can get for free or as cheaply as possible).

The Timing

Day or evening, weekday or weekend. Think about when your audience might be available. It may be appropriate to have an all day event with a number of mini-meetings going on during the day. Remember that a lot of people who may want to get involved work full-time, so you will probably have to do some meetings in the evening or at weekends.

Publicity

There is no point in having a meeting if no one knows about it in advance. Use local shops, libraries, newspapers, Post Office and community centres, etc. to put up posters and distribute leaflets.

Access

Where possible, consider access issues. This may involve getting a translator or a sign language interpreter. Ensure the venue is accessible for wheelchairs and consider hiring an induction loop so people with hearing impairments aren't excluded. Also the time and day that you hold your meeting may be important in terms of access. Consider people's childcare arrangements and cultural considerations. For example Friday is an important day for Muslims and Jewish people and they may not wish to participate in meetings on Fridays.

Follow up

Take the names and addresses of those attending. When you take notes of the main points, make sure these are distributed to all those present. Any kind of meeting should have an outcome and a public meeting is no different. At the end of the meeting, it should be made clear to everyone participating what the next steps are.

3: The Annual General Meeting

If you're worried about organising an Annual General Meeting (AGM), here are a few tips to guide you.

Legal stuff

The first step is to consult your constitution. This will help you sort out the timing, framework and business of your annual general meeting.

Timing

Your constitution probably says something like:

"The organisation will hold the first AGM within 18 months of setting up and then once in each calendar year, with no more than 15 months between AGMs."

The constitution should also tell you the notice period for the annual general meeting that must be given to members, e.g. 21 days notice.

Business

The usual business of an annual general meeting will include:

- A financial report for the year (or receiving of the audited accounts, if this is appropriate)
- A report of the activities in the year
- The election of management committee and officers (chair, secretary and treasurer)
- Appointment of auditors for the next year

After your Annual General Meeting

- Consider your legal requirements. If you are a registered charity you must send an annual return to the Charity Commission. If your income is over £250,000 you must send your audited accounts to the Charity Commission within 10 months of the end of the financial year - but it's usually best to do it once they've been passed at the annual general meeting, so you know it's out of the way.
- If you are a company limited by guarantee, you must send your accounts to Companies House. If you are not sure what you are, then you really must have a look at your constitution!

Quorum

This is the number of voting members of any group that have to be present at a meeting of the group for decisions to be taken, e.g. the minimum number of management committee members needed to take decisions at a management committee meeting. Again this should be defined in your constitution. Remember that it was defined for a reason so to ignore it (i.e. make a decision without a quorum) is breaking your own rules. If any problem was to occur as a result of, or related to, that decision the fact that it was made outside of the constitutional rules will be important and could have negative effects on the members that made the decision. If a meeting is inquorate then there should be a clause in your constitution telling you what should happen - usually a postponement of the meeting. If this is the case, particularly with a general or public meeting, then you should be asking yourselves what went wrong with the publicity for the meeting and how you can improve on turnout next time.

4: Further help

Green Fish Partnership - www.green-fish.org.uk

Voluntary Action Manchester - 0161 236 3206 or www.vamanchester.org.uk