

Factsheet

8: 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
- an Annual General Meeting
- a public meeting
- an informal discussion

These are held for very different purposes and therefore need to 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. Business meetings (general and management committee meetings)

The annual general meeting (AGM), other general meetings (meetings of the organisation's members) and management committee meetings must be held as specified in the constitution in order to carry out the organisation's business.

- Check the constitution for legal requirements: when the AGM has to be held, how often other general meetings and committee meetings have to be held, the notice period required for the different types of meeting, the business that has to be transacted at an AGM, etc.
- Ensure all the relevant papers (such as minutes of the last meeting, agenda and background information for the coming meeting) 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 having a discussion or making a decision based on it.
- The quorum 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 committee members needed to take decisions at a committee meeting, or the minimum number of members of the organisation needed to take decisions at an AGM or other general meeting. This quorum for committee and general meetings should be defined in the organisation's constitution.

A decision made at an inquorate meeting (one where a quorum is not present at the time the decision is made) is invalid and could be challenged – ultimately through the courts – and/or could leave the people who made the decision personally liable for it.

(For example if an inquorate committee meeting commits the organisation to buying a computer and the computer is purchased, and this decision is challenged by a member or members of the organisation or committee, the people who made the decision could be personally liable to pay for the computer.) If a meeting is inquorate there should be a clause in the organisation's constitution setting out what should happen – usually a postponement of the meeting. If general or committee meetings are regularly inquorate, the timing of the meeting and the way it is publicised should be examined, and ultimately it may be advisable to amend the constitution to reduce the quorum.

- The chair must keep control of the meeting, allowing everyone a fair chance to participate and avoiding a situation where meetings are dominated by a small number of individuals.
- Having an agenda helps to focus everyone on what needs to be discussed and decided, makes it more likely that you'll cover all the issues, and means that you will manage the time better. Although some members of any group 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, just the key points and the outcomes of the discussion, or just the outcomes? 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, key reasons for the decision, action required, who will take the action and if appropriate a deadline. The organisation must keep a Minutes Book as a record of all meetings. Checking and agreeing minutes at the beginning of the next meeting is vital in order to avoid later disagreements

Business of the AGM

The usual business of an Annual General Meeting will include the following, but it is essential to check the constitution to see what needs to be done at your organisation's AGM:

- 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, or whatever officers are specified in your constitution)
- Appointment of auditors for the next year

Registered charities with annual income over £25,000 have to send their annual accounts to the Charity Commission within 10 months from the end of the financial year, and registered companies must send their annual accounts to Companies House within nine months from the end of the financial year.

This is usually done immediately after the AGM – but should be done before the AGM if this is necessary to meet the Charity Commission or Companies House deadline.

2. Public meetings

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



Public meetings are generally not business meetings, and have no authority to make decisions on behalf of the organisation. Discussions and recommendations at the meeting may have an impact on decisions at a general or management committee meeting, but the members of the organisation or its committee cannot be in a position where they are obliged to do what the public meeting says they should.

Because public meetings are not business meetings, they do not need a quorum.

Chairing a public meeting is a particular skill, and it is important that the chair is fair and even-handed, can stop individuals from talking too long or straying from the topic, and can keep order if discussions get heated.

Sometimes a public meeting is combined with an AGM or other general meeting. In this case it is essential to be clear about which parts of the meeting are the organisation's business (in which only members of the organisation as defined in the constitution can take part in decisions) and which part is a public meeting in which anyone present can participate. It is often sensible to hold the AGM first, then close the formal business and start the public part of the meeting (or vice versa).

Some things you need to think about when planning a public meeting include:

The participants

Think about the purpose of the meeting, what you want it to achieve, and who needs to be there in order to achieve this. A public meeting to discuss what's needed in the community for young people is likely to need different participants than a meeting to discuss what might be needed for refugees, or for older people, or for unemployed people. A meeting to discuss possible interfaith activities needs different participants than a meeting to discuss local authority proposals for a huge shopping centre. The participants you want to attract will determine where the meeting is held, the time of day, and how you publicise the meeting.

The venue

Somewhere convenient, accessible for disabled people, that people know well and are comfortable visiting (and ideally that people can get for free or as cheaply as possible). Depending on the nature of the meeting you may want the venue to have car parking, kitchen facilities, space for a creche, and/or several smaller rooms where small groups can meet.

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 some meetings may need to be 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 Offices, community centres, churches and other religious centres, schools, colleges, doctors' surgeries etc. to put up posters and distribute leaflets. Use local websites, blogs and email lists, local radio and TV. Ask other community groups in your area or interested in the issues to publicise it.

Access

Consider access issues. This may involve getting a translator or a sign language interpreter. Ensure the venue is accessible for wheelchairs and people with other mobility difficulties, 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 some Muslims may not wish to attend meetings on Fridays; some Jewish people may not wish to attend on Friday night or Saturday, some Christians may not wish to attend on Sunday or in some cases Saturday.

Follow up

As people arrive, ask them to provide their name, address, phone number and email address. If notes or a report of the meeting are produced, 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. Further Help

Manchester Community Central – www.manchestercommunitycentral.org contact 0333 321 3021, email: info@mcrcommunitycentral.org

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