

# The role of the chair

Updated March 2016

A chair is a full member of the committee with the same responsibilities as other committee members. The chair has additional duties, which are summarised below.

## Main duties of the chair

1. Ensure the management committee functions properly by:
  - running effective meetings
  - chairing the meetings
  - leading the committee in setting aims for the year ahead.
2. Ensure the organisation is managed effectively by:
  - ensuring an effective management committee
  - checking the committee meets its responsibilities for running the charity and follows relevant policies and procedures
  - checking that decisions are followed up and put into practice.
3. If your group employs staff the chair will often be the direct line manager for the most senior staff member.
4. The chair also acts as figurehead for the charity at functions, meetings, events and for publicity purposes.

Being a chair can be a very enjoyable and rewarding experience but it can also be challenging at times. The important thing to remember is that in order to be effective, a committee must work together as a group.

***“Excellent communication! This is key. The ability to use different methods of communication too. Don’t just use meetings to ensure the smooth running of your group, use email, post, texting, calls and social networking.”***

***“I think that to be a good chair you need to be organised, dedicated but above all that you need to be a people person and be able to manage people and disputes diplomatically... It is unrealistic to expect everyone to agree all the time.”***



# Running effective meetings

## Before the meeting

Before a committee meeting takes place, it's your job to decide what needs to be discussed and decided at the meeting (with input from the committee), and to ask the group's secretary to include these items on the agenda for the meeting.

## Why is an agenda important?

Having a written agenda for committee meetings can seem a bit old fashioned, particularly if your committee prefers to have relaxed and informal meetings. Even so, many chairs find that having an agenda helps to keep committee meetings focused and running on time. An agenda makes it clear to committee members what needs to be discussed at the meeting, and what decisions need to be made. By sticking to an agenda you can keep everyone on track and reduce the risk of people wandering off the point.

## What needs to be included on an agenda?

An agenda may include:

- items of business, like voting to agree that the minutes of the last meeting are accurate
- time for planning upcoming activities and events
- a chance for committee members to raise issues and questions of their own
- discussions about the group's long-term goals.

An agenda usually gives the committee time for discussion and debate, as well as time to deal with routine business.

## When you're planning an agenda

- Be realistic about how much you'll be able to cover in one meeting. It's better to discuss three things properly rather than only partly covering six things.
- Ask for advice from other committee members if they would like to add any items to the agenda.
- Remember to leave time for any other business.
- Put the most important items at the beginning of the agenda so they're discussed first.
- It can be useful to include standing items on important issues such as child protection.
- Include within the agenda the person responsible, and the time allotted, for each item.



- Writing up and sending out agendas for meetings is one of the secretary's responsibilities. The secretary needs time to do this so make sure you plan ahead.

### A template for an agenda

The secretary may write the agenda for meetings in consultation with you. You will need to include the following:

- the date, time and location of the meeting
- time to welcome those attending and give apologies from those who couldn't make it to the meeting
- reading through and agreeing that the minutes of the previous meeting are correct
- matters arising and urgent matters that are not on the agenda
- a financial report reviewing the financial position and discussing any future income or spending reports from officers, subcommittees and guests
- any items of general business (things that need discussing or decisions made)
- setting the date of the next meeting
- setting a deadline for committee members to give details of items they'd like to discuss at the next meeting
- any other business.

***“Have an agenda for your meeting and stick to it. Ask before the meeting what anyone would like to bring up at the meeting and put this on the agenda. Don't let your meetings run on too long, people will forget information and it may discourage them from staying on the committee. Make sure everyone is involved in all decisions made. Keep points clear and concise, it is not a general chit chat.”***

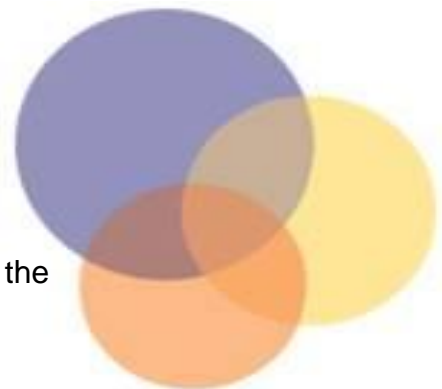
### Chairing committee meetings

It's important that everyone on the committee understands what your role is during committee meetings. Many local committee members (and even chairs) say that they are not sure what the chair's job should be.

#### Introducing agenda items

It is helpful to begin a discussion by summarising the facts of the matter to be discussed. You can do this yourself, or ask another committee member with a better understanding of the issues to do it for you.

Introducing each item on the agenda with a summary of the facts helps to:



- make sure everyone can take part in the discussion (committee members are more likely to join in the debate if they understand clearly what the issues are)
- focus the discussion straight away (people are less likely to go off on the wrong track if they're familiar with the facts)
- provide a basis for discussion so that everyone can be involved, even if they have not heard about the issue before.

## Encouraging opinions

While it is easy for a few outspoken committee members to dominate discussions, it's important that everyone has a chance to contribute. If only a few people do most of the talking, you may be missing ideas and opinions from quieter or less assertive committee members. If some people dominate the conversation try to draw out the quieter members by saying "have you got anything to add to this?" or "great, that's interesting, how do others feel?". Alternatively offer to discuss the person's concerns individually after the meeting, or move the discussion onto the next topic.

## Why do some people feel shy about joining in committee discussions?

Some people do not join in because they:

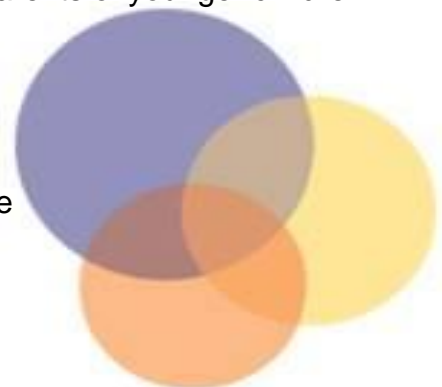
- are not sure whether or not they are supposed to join in the discussion
- worry that they don't know enough to make a worthwhile contribution
- find it hard to talk in front of a group of people, or to make their voices heard above a lively discussion
- have joined in discussions in the past, but felt that no one listened to their contribution.

You can help to involve quieter members by encouraging them to share their opinions, and thanking them for contributions they make. If committee members feel that their contributions are welcomed and that they are being listened to, they will be much more likely to join in future discussions. People who feel that nobody is interested in what they have to say will gradually withdraw and may even decide to resign. Gently encourage people to join the discussion. No one likes to be put on the spot, but people often appreciate being asked to contribute in a less direct way.

For example: "We've heard a lot about this issue from parents of younger children. Does anyone with an older child have an opinion?"

Or:

"Thanks for that, Gill. You mentioned that Shahid said he felt unsure about the best way to get funding for this. Shahid, would you like to speak?"



## Supporting decision-making

During committee meetings, your main role is to help the committee make decisions about how the group is run. You do this by:

- introducing subjects to be discussed
- inviting committee members to join in the discussion
- summarising the discussion and
- calling for a final decision.

During committee meetings, your role is to help committee members make a joint decision, not to make decisions by yourself. Every committee member has an equal responsibility when it comes to making decisions.

If committee members are not sure what your role is during committee meetings, it might be useful to explain it to them at the beginning of your next meeting. Making sure that everyone understands your role is important, because it stops committee members from making unrealistic demands. No chair should have to make all the decisions all of the time.

When the committee meets to discuss a particular issue, it is important that the discussion leads to a firm decision or plan of action. Many committees find it difficult to end discussions, and so spend a long time going over the same points, or getting bogged down in small details.

You can help your committee keep discussions focused on decision-making by summarising what was said, and making it clear what the next step needs to be. You can also empower whoever is taking notes to feel confident to clarify if they are not sure what to minute in terms of an action or decision.

By summarising the main points that people make, you focus attention on the main issues and help the committee to look at the big picture. Summarising is also a good way of bringing a discussion to an end. It draws a line under what has been said and helps the committee look forward to the next step. And of course, summarising helps to make sure that everyone knows what is going on.

### To summarise a discussion, you need to:

- pay attention to what people are saying
- sum up what people have said in a few words
- be unbiased (don't just focus on the points that you agree with) and
- end with a statement about what needs to happen next – say whether a particular issue



needs to be discussed further, or whether a decision needs to be made.

For example:

“Okay. Most people seem to be saying that the group should write a letter on this issue and raise it formally with the clinic. David feels that it would be better to start with a phone call. Should we write, phone, or do both? Let’s make a decision in the next five minutes, because we still have some other items to discuss.”

### **Getting commitment to action**

Make sure that committee meetings result in some kind of action. It’s fine to take time to discuss a challenging issue, or to think about different ways to tackle a problem. However, it’s important that discussions are turned into action. By summarising, and asking what people think the next step should be, you play an important role in leading the committee into agreeing to take action. For example:

“We all agree that the group needs new members, particularly families with younger children. What can we actually do together to get new families involved?”

Try to get people to make a commitment to help:

“Okay – we’ve decided that the Christmas party will need five adult volunteers. How many of us will be able to help?”

Or

“So Miriam has agreed to run a monthly coffee morning. Who cannot help Miriam set up the room for the meeting?”

When people agree to help, write down who has agreed to do what, either in the minutes of the meeting or on a flip chart at the front of the room. Writing down people’s names is a good idea because it reinforces to people that they’ve made a commitment to one another to do what they said they would do. Writing things down also helps people to understand clearly what they are supposed to do.

***“Firstly, ask if people can do things. Also, offer support; sometimes it’s not that a person doesn’t want to do it but that they don’t know how.”***



## Tips for good chairing

### Arrive on time, and make sure that you are well prepared for the meeting

If you arrive late for committee meetings, or arrive without having prepared, it will make a bad impression.

### Starting and finishing meetings

Being strict about starting on time isn't being over formal, it's being responsible with people's time. Committee meetings should start and finish on time. People start to resent meetings that start late, or run on after they are supposed to finish. Remember that committee members need to plan their time. They may have childcare booked, or have arranged for someone to give them a lift. If your meetings regularly run late, you may find that people leave early or stop coming altogether.

### Start the meeting with a welcome

If committee members are late, or don't come at all, it can be tempting to begin the meeting with a bit of a grumble. Try to take a more positive approach by starting the meeting with a welcome for those committee members that have arrived on time. Whether you start on a positive or negative note is important, because it can set the tone for the whole meeting.

### Stick to the agenda

Keeping to your agreed agenda is the best way to have a useful and focused meeting that finishes on time. If people want to discuss issues that aren't included on the agenda, thank them for their contribution and explain that the items on the agenda need to be covered first.

### Don't let small details take over the discussion

"We don't have time to discuss the menu for the Christmas meal today. Alex, could you look into this and bring a suggested menu to the next meeting?", or "It seems that we're just not sure about the name of the new head of service – let's try to find out in time for the next meeting, and move on to the next issue now."

### Say thank you

Remember to thank people for coming. Thank people who prepared something for the meeting by name. Thank people who agreed to take on a specific commitment by name.

### After the meeting

- Make sure people are clear about their duties and responsibilities.



- Make sure the committee knows the date of the next meeting and whether they need a reminder call or letter.
- Make sure the secretary has taken the minutes and sent them to the committee.

## Meeting your responsibilities as a charitable organisation

It is the responsibility of the whole committee to ensure that the organisation complies with its constitution (also known as a governing document), charity law, company law (if applicable), and any other relevant legislation or regulations. The chair should lead the board of trustees to ensure it fulfils these responsibilities.

### Constitution

All local groups have a constitution. A constitution describes the group's aims, how the group will achieve those aims, who will run the group, what happens if the group wants to change its constitution, and what happens if the group wants to end.

- Make sure that everyone on the committee has an up-to-date copy of your group's constitution.
- You can use the constitution to settle disputes about voting or procedures. If the committee can't agree on how something should be done (for example, how voting should be carried out), it is worth checking to see if your constitution can help. The rules in the constitution always take priority.
- If your constitution is out of date, or seems to be out of touch with what your group is doing, think about changing it.
- If you do not have a copy of your group's constitution, please contact the NDCS Local Groups team as we may be able to help.

### Affiliation to NDCS

Local groups affiliated to NDCS have signed up to an affiliation agreement. This is a partnership agreement that describes our mutual rights and responsibilities, and sets out the support your group can expect from NDCS.

Through the NDCS affiliation agreement all groups have agreed to:

- adopt and abide by an equality and diversity policy in a form acceptable to NDCS
- adopt and abide by a complaint policy and procedure in a form acceptable to NDCS
- put into practice the NDCS Child Protection Policy for local groups.

For an up-to-date copy of the affiliation, or any information about the policies listed above, please contact the NDCS Local Groups team.





## Insurance

NDCS cover the cost for a 'Community Groups' insurance policy for each of our affiliated local groups. This means each local group has their own individual insurance policy and each committee is responsible for ensuring activities are covered.

To find out more about what is included in the cover, and for advice and support about your insurance cover please contact the NDCS Local Groups team.

## Charity regulator

All local groups affiliated to NDCS have charitable objects. In addition, depending on where you are based and your annual income, you may be required to register with a charity regulator.

It is important that you know whether your group is a registered charity and, if so, what communication the regulator requires from you each year. For support on this please contact the NDCS Local Groups team.

## Further information

### Publications

- Contact a Family leaflets contain helpful advice on starting up a group, attracting and keeping members, campaigning and developing your skills further to widen your group.
- [www.cafamily.org.uk/advice-and-support/resource-library/?k=Group+Action+Pack](http://www.cafamily.org.uk/advice-and-support/resource-library/?k=Group+Action+Pack)
- The Good Trustee Guide, NCVO  
[www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/products-services/publications/good-trustee-guide](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/products-services/publications/good-trustee-guide)

### Websites

- **NDCS local groups pages**  
[www.ndcs.org.uk/localgroups](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/localgroups)  
Area on NDCS website for affiliated local groups. To read guides, policy and information written for groups click on the Local Group Kit. You can also contact the NDCS Local Groups team at [localgroups@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:localgroups@ndcs.org.uk)
- [www.smallcharities.org.uk/resources](http://www.smallcharities.org.uk/resources)  
The small Charities Coalition is an umbrella organisation which aims to empower small charities across the UK by helping trustees access the skills, tools and information that they need.
- England and Wales Charity Commission (OSCR)  
[www.charity-commission.gov.uk](http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk)

- Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator  
[www.oscr.org.uk](http://www.oscr.org.uk)
- Charity Commission for Northern Ireland  
[www.charitycommissionni.org.uk](http://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk)

