

The role of the secretary

Updated March 2016

The secretary of a local group plays a really important role in ensuring that the committee functions effectively.

Main duties of the secretary

1. Carry out the secretarial functions necessary to support the committee, including:
 - finding a suitable meeting room for committee meetings and the annual general meeting (AGM)
 - arranging interpreters, lip-speakers and other communication support for committee meetings.
2. Helping committee meetings to run smoothly:
 - preparing an agenda with the help of the chair
 - planning and doing administration work for the group's AGM
 - taking minutes at committee meetings, and at the group's AGM.
3. Being the main contact for local parents of deaf children:
 - responding to phone calls, emails and written enquiries from parents who want to find out more about the group
 - collecting up-to-date information about the group's members
 - keeping accurate records of members, including an up-to-date membership list
 - advertising the AGM to the group's members.

Skills needed for a local group secretary

A secretary should:

- be well-organised
- be a good listener
- understand why confidentiality is important.

“I think a secretary needs to be adept at note taking (both quickly and accurately), a good listener, well organised... and having a sense of humour is essential!”



Helping committee meetings to run smoothly

Local group committees need to meet from time to time to plan group activities and keep track of the group's income and spending. It's part of your role to help make sure that committee meetings run smoothly. This section tells you how to help your committee get the most out of its meetings.

About committee meetings

Different committees meet in different ways:

- some meet informally in a committee member's home
- some meet formally around a table, choosing a neutral venue like a community centre
- some meet in a quiet local pub.

Where your committee meets, and how formal its meetings are, depends on what your committee members prefer. Some committees find that they get more done at formal meetings, others find that formal meetings put people off coming. Whether you have a formal or informal meeting doesn't matter that much, as long as the committee can make proper decisions, and as long as you can write proper minutes of those decisions.

A committee should meet as often as is necessary to keep their group running properly. Some very busy committees meet every month, and other less busy committees meet only three or four times a year. It's better to have full and productive meetings every other month rather than having a meeting every month where nobody has anything to say.

Some groups have a constitution that says they need to meet a certain number of times in a year. Having a set target like this can be a good way of making sure that the committee meets regularly. However, if your constitution says that you need to meet more regularly than you need to, it's worth changing it.

Finding and booking a suitable room for committee meetings

Ask around your local area to find out about possible meeting places, and how to book them.

When booking a venue, remember to do the following:

- Check that the facilities you want will be available. For example, will the kitchen be open to allow you to make tea and coffee?
- Check how you will get access to the meeting room. Will you need to pick up a key or will there be someone there to let you in?



- Will the tables and chairs already be arranged or will the group need to do this when they arrive?
- Are there good transport links to the venue, and sufficient car parking arrangements?

There are lots of different places where your committee can meet. The type of place you choose depends on things like where committee members live, how formal your meetings are, and how much your group wants to spend on hiring a meeting place. Different meeting places have their good points and bad points.

Possible places	Good points	Bad points
At a community centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some committees prefer to meet at community centres because they're neutral places where everybody feels equal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A community centre may feel too big if you have an informal committee. • You may have to pay for the room and for refreshments.
At the home of a committee member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings at the homes of committee members can be friendly and relaxed. • There aren't any real costs involved, so it's a good option if you're saving funds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some committee members might not be happy, or able, to hold a meeting at their house or flat. • New committee members may not feel comfortable going to someone's house if they don't know them very well.
At a pub or café	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some groups like to meet at a pub or café because it's a relaxed and friendly place to meet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There can be lots of distractions at pubs and cafes, which make it difficult to concentrate on the group's business. • Pubs and cafes also have lots of background noise, which can make it harder for deaf people to get involved. • Some people don't like going to pubs for religious or cultural reasons.
At a school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools sometimes let local groups use their facilities for free. They're big spaces that give you lots of flexibility in how formal your meetings are. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some committees prefer not to meet in schools because they feel it affects their ability to be independent of the local education authority.

“Our group meets at members’ houses. We take it in turn to act as hosts... People seem happier and more relaxed in an informal setting which is an important consideration if you want people to feel at home and confident enough to express their views. Hopefully such a setting is less daunting for any new member than coming into a large impersonal room. Another key factor is it doesn’t cost the group anything! Some members have mixed feelings about this and wonder if changing to an ‘outside’ venue would in fact attract a bigger membership. The problem is trying to find somewhere suitable which is easily accessible to the majority. At least we can vary the location each month, which I think is about as fair as you can get.”



Writing agendas for committee meetings

Having written agendas for committee meetings can seem a bit old-fashioned, particularly if your committee prefers to have relaxed and informal meetings. Even so, many committees find that having an agenda helps to keep meetings focused and running on time. An agenda makes it clear to committee members what issues need 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.

There's no rule to say that you need to have agendas for committee meetings - it's up to the committee and the chair to decide whether they're needed or not.

If your committee does use an agenda, the secretary will usually write them up in consultation with the chair. The secretary will then print them out in time for the meeting. If you're asked to write an agenda:

- ask the chair what issues he or she wants to include
- say when the meeting will begin and end
- 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
- put the most important items at the beginning of the agenda so they're discussed first
- remember to leave time for any other business
- include within the agenda the person responsible, and the time allotted, for each item
- for each point on the agenda, say whether it's a point for discussion, for information only, or whether a decision needs to be made.

You don't have to send committee members copies of the agenda before your meeting, although this can be helpful if your committee meets only a few times a year. For most committees, it's enough for printed copies of the agenda to be available at the beginning of the meeting. However if you want any of the committee to prepare or bring anything for a particular agenda item, they need to be told in advance, so they can do this.

“Once the Committee business is over, members can tuck into the refreshments and enjoy a good chat so it is very much a social gathering as well. I try to emphasise this aspect because sometimes people can be put off by the idea of a ‘formal’ meeting.”



Taking minutes

Taking minutes is one of the most important jobs of a local group secretary. No matter how informal your committee meetings are, it is a good idea to take minutes.

Minutes are a record of the committee's discussions and decisions. They give everyone on the committee the chance to check exactly what was said, what decisions were taken, and who agreed to carry out particular tasks. Accurate minutes help committee members to understand what needs to be done and who needs to do what. Without proper minutes, committee members can get confused over what was discussed, and may challenge decisions that have been agreed.

Good minutes don't need to record everything that's said, in fact the best minutes are often the shortest. Good minutes focus on the most important facts and decisions, and summarise what was said in short, punchy sentences. By keeping minutes short you make them easier to read and understand.

When you're taking minutes:

- record important facts and issues
- focus on the most important points raised during the discussion
- highlight any decisions that are made
- list the jobs that need to be done, and who has agreed to do them
- ask the chair to summarise the discussion or decisions if you're not sure what they are.

Who needs to get minutes of committee meetings?

All committee members should get a copy of the minutes of committee meetings, whether they came to the meeting or not. Other members of your group can ask for copies of the minutes if they want to see them, but you don't need to give them a copy unless they ask.

Some committees ask their secretaries to send minutes to committee members within two weeks of the meeting. Other committees ask their secretary to have the minutes ready in time for the next meeting. Think about which option would be most practical for you. The important thing is that those who attended are given an opportunity to agree that the minutes were an accurate reflection of the discussions that took place, and to raise it if they do not.



Membership of your group

Your group will probably have its own procedure people have to follow to join. Perhaps you ask new members to fill in a membership form, or to pay a small membership fee. Whatever way you ask people to join your group, it's only these people who should be included on your membership list. Your mailing list can include anyone who's interested in your group, but a membership list should only include people who have formally joined your group.

How to keep a membership list

Although a handwritten membership list can be a good starting point (particularly for groups with only a few members), most groups eventually decide to keep an electronic record (on computer) of their members' information.

NDCS provides an online database for each affiliated group. The database is a safe and secure method of storing group contact information. In addition, NDCS use it to share information about families and professionals that join our charity and would like to be put in touch with their closest local group so the database is also a great tool for recruitment of new group members.

Using the NDCS online database has the following advantages.

- It's easy to change members' information.
- You can print personalised letters.
- You can print address labels out automatically, rather than writing them out by hand.
- If your computer breaks, or is stolen, your membership data will not be lost.
- All committee members can access the most up to date mailing list.

To find out more about the online database please contact the NDCS Local Groups team.

Membership form

Most groups find it useful to have a simple membership form. Start by thinking about what information you need from your members. In general, it's better to keep your membership list simple - complicated lists with lots of information about your families are difficult to manage, and take a lot of time to maintain.



Example membership form used by North Hampshire DCS



The North Hampshire Deaf Children's Society is run by parents of deaf children and other volunteers. We provide support for parents, carers and others interested in helping children with a hearing loss.

FREE MEMBERSHIP

If you and your family would like to be members of the NHDCS, please complete this form so that we have an accurate record of your details. Where possible please provide an email contact address so that we can keep you updated with news, events etc in this manner. If you do not have an email address this information will be sent to you by post.

MEMBERSHIP FORM			
Please complete in CAPITAL letters.			
Parent/Carers/Volunteers Full Name _____			
Are you Deaf or Hearing? _____			
Your preferred method of communication _____ (English, BSL, SSE, other language)			
Address _____			
Postcode _____ Phone/Minicom/mobile no. _____			
E-mail _____			
Childs Name	Date of Birth	Deaf/Hearing	Method of communication
Does any member of your family have additional special needs or requirements that we should consider when organising events? If so, please give further details here. _____			
Would you like to receive minutes of committee meetings? YES/NO _____			
Would you be interested in joining the committee/help plan events? YES/NO _____			
Would you like to receive events flyers and newsletters? YES/NO _____			
Would you agree to photos of your child/ren taken at NHDCS events being published on our website? YES/NO _____			
Date form completed _____ Signed _____			
All details given will be kept on our database and will not be released to any other agency.			

Please return the form by email to: northhampshire@ndcsgroup.org.uk or by post to 26 Elmwood Way, Basingstoke, RG23 8LG. Visit us at Facebook [NHDCS Facebook page](#) or <http://www.nhdcs.co.uk>

Data protection

Any organisation in the UK that handles personal information about individuals has a number of legal obligations to protect that information under the Data Protection Act 1998.

All local groups must:

- only process information necessary to establish or maintain membership or support
- only process information necessary to provide or administer activities for people who are members of the organisation or have regular contact with it
- only share the information with people and organisations necessary to carry out the organisation's activities unless individuals give you permission to share their information
- only keep the information while the individual is a member or supporter or as long as necessary for member/supporter administration
- ensure that the contact information and data you have for your members is kept secure. This could be in a locked filing cabinet, as a password-protected file on your computer, or by using the NDCS online password protected database.

The information in this document provides some basic guidance on the Data Protection Act, but it does not give a full explanation of the law. You may like to look at other information contained within the Information Commissioner's website www.dataprotection.gov.uk or telephone their information line on 01625 545745.

If your committee is struggling to understand your responsibilities with regards to data protection please contact the NDCS Local Groups team.



Acting as the main contact for the group

Being welcoming and friendly

Parents contacting you for the first time are probably a bit nervous and shy. They might be worried that your group isn't for them, or that they'll be criticised for their choices about their child's education, and the communication method and technologies they use. Some parents might have been left out or very shy in other groups and be worried that this will happen again. Anything that you can do to reassure them will make them more likely to join your group and come to your activities and events. Whether you're speaking over the phone, or in person, a warm and friendly welcome could count for so much.

“I am very aware that often I am the first point of contact for parents and carers wishing to find about our group and what it can offer. I agree it's quite a responsibility really. With newly diagnosed parents of deaf children, I feel it is most important to listen.”

“People are often in state of shock and to talk to someone independent from the family can be helpful. Not feeling on your own is so important and to know that there is a group of people locally whose children encompass all age groups, have different levels of hearing impairment and communicate orally or by signing (or both) is a start.”

Tips for making new people welcome

- Smile – even if you're talking over the phone, you'll sound friendlier if you're smiling.
- If you don't have time to talk, say so, and ask if it would be okay for you to call back later. People can usually tell if you're in a hurry, or distracted, so it's better to be open about it.
- Reassure them that the group is for everyone - it doesn't matter how they communicate with their child, or what technology he or she uses.
- If someone is nervous about coming to one of your group's activities on their own, offer to meet them outside the venue so they won't have to arrive alone.

Make it easy for families to contact you

A few small changes can make it much easier for families to contact you.

- Have a single contact number and single email address for the group, and make them as widely known as possible.



- Think about how to make it easier for deaf parents of deaf children to contact you. For example, if you have an email address try to include it on your group's publicity.

Keeping NDCS up to date

- Ensure NDCS have up to date contact details for your committee so we are giving potential new members the right information. This includes ensuring your group's area on the NDCS website is up to date.
- Clarify with your members that being a member of the local group does not necessarily mean they are a member of NDCS. Being a member of NDCS provides huge benefits and is free of charge. If someone is not sure whether they are a member of NDCS, ask them if they receive the NDCS *Families Magazine*, if they don't, it is likely they are not a member of NDCS.

Responding to members' calls and emails

If a new parent contacts you for the first time, it's even more important to reply within a few days. New parents are likely to be feeling a bit shy and uncertain about whether the group is for them. If one of your members leaves an answer phone message or an email, try to respond as soon as you can. Of course, it's not always practical or convenient to reply immediately, but try to reply within a few days. Returning your members' calls and emails quickly is a good way to show that your group values its members.

Have a dedicated phone line for the group

Some local groups have a separate phone line and phone number for enquiries about the group. Having a group phone line is a good idea for the following reasons.

- You have more control over when you take calls about the group; you can switch the phone to voicemail if you don't want to be disturbed by questions about the group.
- You can record a voicemail message that introduces the group, explains that you'll return the call, and asks parents to leave a message.
- The number can be publicised widely as it's not anyone's home phone number.
- If the secretary changes, it's possible to keep the group contact number the same.
- It's much easier to keep track of the group's phone expenses - no more going through phone bills with a highlighter pen!

Having a separate phone line for the group doesn't need to involve extra costs or having a new landline installed at home. One of the simplest ways to get a



separate line for the group is to get a cheap pay-as-you-go mobile phone. Or does anyone have a spare mobile phone that you could use?

Have a dedicated email address for the group

NDCS provides an email address for each affiliated local group. Using this email address makes it easier for people to contact your local group, and it gives your group a more professional appearance.

As secretary, it is your responsibility to check how your emails are being accessed and to provide the correct information if this needs to be updated.

If someone needs to talk

All kinds of parents contact local groups, and for all kinds of reasons. Most of the time they just want to find out more about the group, and the activities it organises for deaf children. However, sometimes parents contact their nearest local group because they're upset, confused or need help.

A parent might contact you because:

- their child has just been diagnosed as having a hearing loss, and they're feeling upset or worried
- they're concerned that their child isn't getting the support they need at school
- they're applying for Disability Living Allowance and need help filling in the form.

If a parent needs special support or information, ask them to call the NDCS Freephone Helpline on 0808 800 8880 (voice and text). Our Helpline team are trained to offer clear and balanced information, and provide information about our support services.



Working with the chair to plan the group's AGM

Annual general meetings are open to all of the members of your group. During the meeting, the committee explains what they've achieved over the past 12 months and reports on the group's income and spending. Once the committee has reported back on their work, there's a chance for members to ask questions and to suggest ideas for future activities and events. The meeting ends with the formal election of new committee members and trustees.

What happens at an AGM?

There are no set rules on what should happen at an AGM, although your group's constitution might list the main things that need to be done. In general, most AGMs cover the following:

- agreeing the minutes from the previous year's AGM
- an update, from the chair of the group, explaining what has happened over the last 12 months
- a summary, from the group's treasurer, of the group's income and spending over the last year
- questions from members
- electing or re-electing committee members.

How to call an AGM

Once the committee has decided on a date for the meeting, it's your job to make sure that members receive their invitations and the information they need before the meeting. It's best to send out invitations early - your members are likely to be as busy as you are, so the more notice you give them, the better. Your constitution may state the number of days notice you should give - this is usually around 21 days.

Your invitation should say:

- when and where the AGM will take place (enclose a map if the meeting place isn't well known locally)
- how long the meeting will take
- what needs to be discussed and decided at the meeting
- who people should contact if they would like to add a topic to the agenda.

Who should be invited to the AGM?

AGMs are members' meetings which means that all group members can come along and should be invited. People who aren't members of the group can come along if you invite them, but they shouldn't be allowed to take over the discussion, or take part in electing new committee members.



What to do on the day of the AGM

Setting the room up - often the group committee will sit at the head of the room, facing the members. This is a good way of showing who is on the committee, and who is a general member.

Clearly signpost where the meeting is being held - making members' arrival as easy as possible will set the tone for a relaxed atmosphere during the meeting. Think about putting up posters to direct people to the room.

Information - make sure you have printed copies of the agenda and any other information (such as a printed copy of the chair's report or your most recent accounts) available to all attendees.

Writing minutes - you will need to record the minutes of the meeting. The most important detail will be the information about who resigns, who was re-elected, and who was elected for the first time.

Electing a new committee

Nomination - everyone who stands for election should be nominated (by themselves or another member) and seconded (i.e. a second member should also provide a nomination). Ideally nominations should be made before the meeting takes place so that they can be listed on the agenda given out at the beginning of the meeting.

Voting - it is usual to vote by a show of hands. If a decision is not immediately clear from a general showing of hands, then you can count each vote individually. You may opt for a private ballot - this allows people to vote confidentially. If the vote is tied, the group chair should have the second and deciding vote as a last resort.

Writing a summary of the election process within the meeting minutes is very important.

How can you get people to attend your AGM?

Lots of groups have told us they find it difficult to fill seats at their AGM - here are some suggestions that might help you overcome this.

- Try combining the formal side of the AGM with a popular social event.
- Have a speaker on a burning issue.
- Give members plenty of notice, and send reminders.
- Emphasise to members that this is their chance to say what their family wants from the group.
- Keep the business brief and avoid running over time.
- Invite local professionals and advertise their attendance.
- Avoid hosting the event in a committee member's house and ensure that the venue is accessible for all your members.
- Try to host the event at a time most convenient to your members.

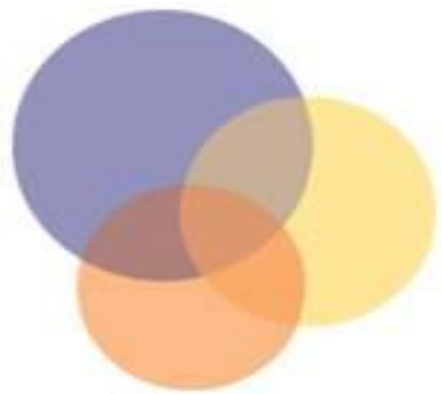


Tips from other groups

South Hampshire DCS received back only a small number of replies for the AGM and had to cancel the entertainer they had booked for the children. They changed the venue to a local shopping centre, let parents know the meeting would only last 30 minutes, and tempted them with cakes and drinks - it worked!

Brighton & Hove DCS held their AGM at a local farm. After the meeting all deaf children could use the farm for free and they subsidised the entrance fee for other family members to £5 (from £10) per head.

Ipswich DCS usually combine their AGM with another event. In the past they have had speakers, created a display of the latest technology, and one year they combined it with an awards ceremony for the children in the group. This was really good for encouraging new families to come along, especially those with younger children. They always keep the business short, and one way to help this is to distribute the minutes from last year's meeting beforehand so there is no need to read them through on the night.



AGM notice sample

London Deaf Children's Society

Notice of Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting of London DCS will be held at **London Community Centre, Pal Mal, London** at **7.30 pm until 9.30 pm** on **01 July 2014**.

Agenda

1. Agreement of minutes for previous AGM
2. Group update from group chair. Reporting on group activities over the last year and plans for the future.

There will be a chance to ask questions.

3. Accounts update from treasurer. Reporting on group's income and spending throughout the last year.

There will be a chance to ask questions.

4. Appointing the committee.

The following are standing for election

- Claire Moore standing for Chair
- Chris Connery standing for Treasurer
- Rebecca Craig standing for Secretary
- Tom Brosnan standing for committee member
- Laura Dalton standing for committee member
- We welcome nominations for a fundraiser for the committee
- We welcome nominations for an event organiser for the committee

5. Any other business

Group members are invited to add to the agenda and to nominate individuals for the committee. If you would like to do either or require further information please contact Rebecca Craig.



Dealing with money

Although most secretaries aren't closely involved with their group's finances, you might sometimes need to:

- deal with money coming in (for example, membership fees and donations)
- buy goods or services for the group (for example, paying to hire your meeting room)
- claim expenses to refund money that you've spent on the group from your own pocket.

Your group will probably have its own way of dealing with money coming in, and spending and handling committee members' expense claims. It's a good idea to follow the agreed system as if everyone handles money in a different way it makes it difficult to keep proper accounts and records for the group. If you don't know what your group's system for dealing with money and expenses is, try asking your treasurer for help. They should be able to tell you how the system works in practice.

Dealing with money coming in

Your treasurer is responsible for banking all money that comes in, and for keeping records of where it comes from and what it's for. If someone gives you a donation or membership fee, simply pass it on to the treasurer with a note explaining who it's from and what it's for. If you're given a cash donation or membership fee, don't be tempted to hang on to it as petty cash to pay for goods or services for the group. All income, no matter how small, needs to be banked and recorded by the treasurer. The treasurer's job can become very difficult if committee members start their own unofficial petty cash accounts.

Paying for things on behalf of the group

If you need to pay for something from the group you can either:

- get an authorised person to write a cheque for you
- ask for some money from the authorised petty-cash account, if you have one
- ask for an invoice to be sent directly to the treasurer.

Claiming expenses

People who run charities can claim reasonable and necessary expenses from the charity. This doesn't mean that committee members can pay the group's bills from their own personal accounts, and then claim the money back as expenses. It's just a way of making sure that their work for the group doesn't leave committee members out of pocket.



You might want to claim expenses for the cost of:

- phone calls you make to members
- printer cartridges, if you print out letters and newsletters at home
- tea and coffee, if you hold committee meetings in your own home.

If you want to claim expenses, you should talk to your group's treasurer. He or she will be able to tell you how to go about claiming, and whether you need to fill in a form or list your expenses in some other way. Your treasurer will probably ask to see receipts for the things you're claiming expenses for, or an itemised phone bill showing the calls that you've made on behalf of the group.

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
- The Good Trustee Guide, NCVO
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/products-services/publications/good-trustee-guide

Websites

- **NDCS local groups pages**
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'. To get in touch with the NDCS Local Groups team email localgroups@ndcs.org.uk.
- 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
www.charity-commission.gov.uk



- Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)
www.oscr.org.uk
- Charity Commission for Northern Ireland
www.charitycommissionni.org.uk