

Tips on Running a Public Meeting from (www.justdosomething.net):

Chairing a public meeting

How to run an effective and efficient public meeting

Chairing an effective public meeting requires slightly different tactics and skills from those required to chair, for example, a meeting of your local tenants' association committee. There are more people present and therefore the meeting can be harder to control. But the basic principles are still the same.

Start on time

It's your responsibility to call everyone to order and get the meeting off the ground. A lot of people will be giving up their time to attend so it is important it's not wasted.

Get your voice heard

Public meetings are usually held in bigger venues which aren't necessarily better when it comes to equipment, acoustics, etc. Go to the venue with a friend beforehand and see if he or she can hear you when they are standing at the back. If you're inaudible, you might need to sort out a microphone.

Clarify roles and rules

Make it clear before you start that:

- you will be sticking to the agenda
- comments are to be addressed to the chair
- no heckling will be allowed
- there will be a question and answer session to allow everyone to have their say.

Follow the agenda

It's your responsibility to make sure the agenda's followed. If anything extra comes up which needs to be discussed, put it down as an action point for the next meeting (see our factsheets on taking minutes and action points).

Be fair but firm

Make it clear that debate is welcomed but personal abuse will not be tolerated. For more tips see our factsheet on what to do if a meeting gets out of control.

Keep it going

Many people will probably want to contribute their views but there will come a time when there's no point continuing with a discussion. You may be going round in circles or the same thing might be repeated over and over again by different people. It's your job to draw a line under each topic of discussion and get things moving again.

Summarise

After each agenda point, summarise the key decisions, opinions and actions. It's your job to make sure that decisions and actions are clearly understood and that they are moving in the right direction to accomplish the meeting's objectives.

Thank your audience

Always thank attendees once the meeting is finished. It's common courtesy and people appreciate it. They are more likely to come to the next meeting if they feel they have made a contribution. It's also a good idea to let them know the date of the next meeting in your

closing comments.

Dealing with different participants

How to handle testing times at your meeting

Meetings can bring out the best - and worst - in people. Some people thrive on the opportunity to share their views in front of a large group, some try to hide away while others take over and don't let anyone else get a word in. If you're running the meeting, you need to be able to deal with all types. Here are some of the more testing participants you might come across and how to deal with them...

The bully or aggressive type

This person usually has a grudge to bear or is angry about an issue that affects him or her personally. They can try and dominate the meeting by shouting down and intimidating other attendees as well as the person running the meeting.

What to do:

- Establish ground rules at the beginning of the meeting - such as no-one is allowed to interrupt and personal insults are forbidden - and get everyone to agree to them.
- Find out what's causing the person to be aggressive and if it's a personal issue, explain that the meeting can't deal with this but suggest an alternative arena where they can raise it.
- Offer to feed back to them in private if it's a personal concern they have.
- Prevent them from making too many contributions by encouraging others to give their views.

The over-talkative know-all

Know-alls usually see themselves as experts on an issue and think they know best. Again, they might dominate the meeting by talking at great length or constantly interrupting others.

What to do:

- Set limits on individuals' speaking time at the beginning of the meeting.
- Acknowledge their contribution but if they're going on too long, try and interrupt them tactfully.
- Avoid making eye contact so they can't keep interrupting you.
- Direct questions to other attendees instead

The argumentative type

Whatever the issue, this type of person will play devil's advocate and argue the opposite of everyone else. It can be useful to see the other side of an argument but if it goes on too long or gets over-heated, it can detract from the meeting.

What to do:

- Emphasise the need for constructive comments at the start of the meeting.
- Don't be drawn into their argument - respectfully acknowledge what they've said and move on.
- Bring in other participants in the meeting to give their views.

The non-participant

These people are more rare at public meetings than at, say, staff meetings because if people have bothered to turn up in the first place, they're likely to have something they want to say. However, they might feel intimidated by their surroundings or by the other people there and may need some encouragement to speak up.

What to do:

- Ask for anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak to give their views.
- If they do speak up, encourage any input they give.
- If you know they're interested in or are an expert in a specific area, ask for their expert opinion.
- Hand out questionnaires for people to fill in if they're too shy to speak out and remember to collect them at the end.

Taking minutes

It's a boring job but someone's got to do it

Taking minutes may not be the most glamorous job in the world but it's absolutely necessary to avoid conflict and mixed messages later on. Here's how to produce the perfect minutes.

Minutes need to be:

- Accurate. They must be a true record of what occurred. That means no drifting off during finer points of discussion.
- Clear and unambiguous. Minutes can't be open to interpretation or discussion. Otherwise, they're pointless.
- Consistently structured. Decide on a structure (bullet points or numbers are the most common) and stick to it. Your minutes will be a lot easier to read and they will look a lot more professional.
- Brief. You should summarise discussions and decisions rather than attempt to get them down verbatim.

It's also vital that whoever takes the minutes understands the subject. A confused notetaker will produce confused minutes.

Minutes should contain:

- A heading, including title, date, time and location of the meeting
- Names of everyone present. This is important because it shows who was present (or not) when important decisions were made. It's customary to list the chair first, followed by other attendees in alphabetical order.
- Apologies for absence. This is primarily for people who were invited but unable to attend and have sent their apologies. You can also list people who are absent and haven't sent apologies if you like.
- Minutes of last meeting plus matters arising and action points.
- The agenda. See our factsheet on putting together an agenda.

And don't forget:

- If something's not clear, ask for clarification from the speaker or the chair. It could save a lot of time later on.

- Don't try and take down every word - just the relevant points.
- Get the minutes typed up as soon as possible. It's always best to record these things while they're fresh in your mind.
- Make sure you can read your own handwriting!

When a meeting gets out of control

Keep your cool when tempers flare

It would be nice to think that if you arrange and publicise your meeting properly, it's all going to go off smoothly. Sadly, things don't always go to plan and if you're talking about an emotive issue, the discussion may develop into a dispute.

So keep your cool with our top tips for handling difficult meetings.

Make the purpose clear

Public meetings can be held for all sorts of reasons. Maybe something's already been decided and you need to meet to delegate tasks to participants. Make sure you make the purpose of the meeting clear - if something's already been decided, it's not up for discussion. If people come expecting a debate and it doesn't happen, they're more likely to make their voices heard in less organised ways.

Explain the rules

Explain the structure of the meeting before it starts. You might, for example, make it clear that speakers are not to be heckled - there will be a question and answer session afterwards. Emphasis that all comments are to be addressed to the chair and that attendees must put their hand up and wait to be called upon before speaking.

The structure should also be explained in the agenda which every attendee should have. But it never does any harm to reiterate the agenda as some attendees won't bother to read every handout you give them.

Be polite

If someone heckles you, don't get involved in a slanging match. Trading insults won't do much for your credibility and will just waste the time of the attendees who are there to support or to engage in worthwhile debate. Firmly point out to the heckler that you are anxious to hear all points of view but that these must be given at the correct time and in the correct form.

If you're polite, it's likely that the majority will side with you. Once a heckler realises that he or she is in the minority, they will hopefully either quiet down or leave.

Debate not disruption

If you're nervous, it's easy to mistake a passionately held viewpoint for a disruptive comment, especially if the viewpoint doesn't fit with your own. Don't come down too hard on people, otherwise you might find that others are nervous about speaking up. It's a fine line to tread but once you're in the meeting you should get a feel for the amount of discipline needed.

Don't be afraid to say you don't know

Hopefully, you'll have done your research before the meeting starts but there's always a chance that someone's going to hit you with an issue you know nothing about.

If this happens, remain calm. Use the old politician's trick of repeating the question or using a phrase such as "that's a very interesting point". This gives you a few seconds to get your answer straight in your mind, reducing the possibility of you stuttering or sounding unsure.

If you don't know the answer, admit it. Say something like, "I wasn't aware of that particular issue, does anyone else here have any knowledge about it?" If nobody else speaks up, ask the questioner to see you after the meeting to give you some background. It could well be something important and even if it's not, you'll look good in front of your audience.