

**Seeds for
Change
Short guide**



Organising successful meetings

A practical guide to planning and running effective meetings

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Organising successful meetings

Meetings are an important way for people to come together for a common purpose – whether that's to plan an environmental campaign, offer mutual support or run your co-operative.

A big focus of this guide is making sure everyone affected by the issue can have their say if they want to, and be fully engaged in what's going on. This helps make the meeting a good experience for different people and brings a wider range of perspectives into your discussions and decisions. Ideally, everyone leaves a meeting feeling heard, understood and positive about the group and any plans or decisions you have made.

You'll also find practical tips on how to making your meeting focussed and productive, making good use of everyone's time and energy.

For more ideas and a more in-depth discussion of the issues involved in holding meetings take a look at our guides *Facilitating Meetings* and *Venues and Accessibility* available on our website www.seedsforchange.org.uk



Planning the meeting

Putting thought in before the meeting can make a big difference to how it goes. This includes deciding how the meeting is run, and practical choices like what venue to use.

What's the purpose of your meeting?

Start by getting clear about what you are trying to achieve. This will impact on all kinds of decisions about how the meeting should work.

If you are holding a public meeting it is especially important to be clear about your purpose *before* you invite people. For example, imagine you are calling a meeting in response to a planning application for a new coal mine near your village. Do you want to share information, start a debate, or launch a campaign against the mine? Being explicit on your publicity will help people decide if the meeting is for them.

Whatever the main focus of your meeting, it will also be a space where people get a 'feeling' for what your group is like. Therefore, whatever the subject of the meeting, one goal could be creating a welcoming atmosphere and strengthening relationships.

Timing of meetings

There are lots of factors affecting when people can turn up to meetings - and how awake and relaxed they will be when they get there!

If you are holding a public meeting, make sure you give lots of advance notice so that people can plan to be there. Publicise an end time as well as a start time - and consider keeping the meeting short.

In an established group it is easier to ask people about what timings would work for them. Remember to consult with people who are interested but haven't attended previous meetings. Consider whether to

choose a regular time, (e.g. the first Tuesday of every month). This makes it easier to remember meetings, but you will lose anyone who can never make that day.

Find a venue / decide whether to hold online

Where and how you meet has a big impact on how many people will come, and how easy it will be for everyone to participate. Online meetings are less effort to attend, and accessible to more people. On the other hand some people will find it harder to engage in discussion and relationship-building online.

Location: You can often find a private room to hire or use for free in community centres, religious buildings, pubs or cafes. The fire service in Britain has community rooms that can be booked for free by the public. If you will just be a small group you could meet in a cafe or someone's house, but be aware there can be accessibility downsides like difficulty hearing or distractions in a public space. It may be cheaper to share the hire costs of a room with a kettle than to meet somewhere where everyone is expected to buy a drink.

Comfort: Having enough space, lighting and fresh air can make it much easier to concentrate. Consider how easy it will be for people to hear each other – e.g. is there background noise from another room?

Accessibility: Our *Accessible Venues* guide provides a lot more detail on things to think about. Ask people who plan to attend to contact you in advance about their access requirements, and be prepared to move venues or adapt to accommodate them.

Being welcoming: The space you are in will affect who feels comfortable, (e.g. pubs or religious buildings may put some people off).

Letting people know about the meeting

If you want to reach beyond the core organisers who normally come to every meeting and attract new people then publicity will take some thought.

Creating publicity materials

Use eye-catching images, and limited text to increase the chance people will notice and look at your publicity. Make sure to include all the important details: where, when, what the purpose of the meeting is, who is organising it and contact details. Think about the message your publicity gives about what the group is like and who is welcome.

Distributing the publicity

Consider using a wide range of methods, e.g. social media, email lists, fliers through doors, a stall, posters, events listings, writing an article in the local paper, or speaking on local radio. Sending personal invites by text message to people who are peripherally involved can often be one of the most effective methods for getting people along.

Think how you can reach the people you are particularly targeting, e.g. posters on cycle routes and fliers at other cycling related events for a meeting about creating new cycle paths. Try to reach beyond the people who usually come to your events, e.g. a poster about your vegan meeting on the supermarket noticeboard as well as in the vegetarian cafe.

Find people for key roles

Sometimes people will volunteer for these roles at the start of the meeting. However, there can be benefits to deciding in advance so that people can prepare themselves, e.g. bring a laptop to take minutes.

Facilitator: the person (or people) responsible for helping your meeting achieve its goals, e.g. by keeping the group focused on the agenda.

Minute-taker: the person responsible for creating a record of key points from the meeting (e.g. decisions and action points).

Other roles: Especially relevant in larger meetings. Consider having different people to welcome new arrivals, offer refreshments, keep the meeting to time, introduce speakers etc. Online, appoint someone to deal with technical issues, and to help people who are struggling to connect.

Meeting different needs

We all vary in things like: how often we need a break, whether we need to move around to stay awake, how we take in information most easily, whether we prefer to talk in small groups or have everyone together. Any meeting style will make it easier for some people to participate, but harder for others. Varying activities will help more people to be involved. For example, you could create opportunities to move around during the meeting and follow up a presentation by chatting in small groups.

Also bear in mind accessibility requirements of the meeting participants, e.g. if you are printing the agenda, could you provide a large print version? You can invite people to get in touch to tell you about their requirements. For a public meeting, you might also want to provide information about the venue and how you imagine the meeting working, so people know what to expect and can contact you with any concerns.

Making an agenda

A meeting agenda is a list of what you intend to talk about, in what order. This might be a list of decisions you need to make, or broader topics like 'Share how we're feeling about the group.' It may include your finish time and when you'll have breaks.

Sometimes you will decide this at the start of the meeting, but you can save time if it is drawn up in advance. In this case, make sure you have an easy method for people to put items forward. Ideally, send round the agenda with enough time to get input from people who can't attend, (e.g. they could email the group).

Sample meeting agenda

- 7.00** Introductions and Check-in
- 7.15** Report back from working groups: media, finance, stalls
- 7.35** Meeting with Planning Officer: agree which issues to raise
- 8.00 Break: tea and cake**
- 8.20** Organising more stalls
- 9.00** Evaluation and Close

During the meeting

Below are tips and ideas for helping your meeting run well. Some of them are mainly the responsibility of the facilitator or organisers, but it helps when everyone pays some attention to making the meeting work.

Setting up the room

Try to find a layout that will be welcoming and make it easy to join in. Circles are best for seeing each others' faces and hearing each other easily. However, some people feel less exposed when the chairs are in rows, or even arranged grouped round small tables like a cafe.

Consider other factors about the environment that will affect how easily people can focus. For example, lighting, background noise and acoustics, windows open or closed, temperature, easy availability of refreshments.

Things to bear in mind

Keep focus: A meeting is (usually) more productive if you can keep focused on one issue at a time. A facilitator can help by drawing people back to the topic at hand, and offering short summaries. Simple visuals also help, e.g. writing up different ideas where everyone can see them.

Make space for everyone to participate: Share background information. Use questions to open up space for different opinions: "I'm hearing lots of agreement with the idea of postponing the fundraiser, does anyone have concerns?" Pay attention to the sharing out of jobs, and look for ways to make it easy for new people to take things on.

Make the meeting engaging: Vary the format of your meeting so more people can concentrate and contribute. Try using facilitation tools (see below). Where helpful, create opportunities for people to move around, talk in small groups and have solo reflection time. If there's a lot of background information to digest, try preparing some appealing visuals

to help people get their heads round it. Have breaks!

Stay welcoming: It is important that members leave feeling positive about themselves, each other and the group! Jokes, concern for people's feelings and even short anecdotes help create a friendly atmosphere. Be ready to challenge behaviours that leave anyone feeling less welcome.

Notice and address emotional tensions and disagreements: Many groups try to brush aside their differences and conflicts. Others can get 'stuck' in their disagreements. In many cases, an open, honest discussion will help to resolve an issue. This is often easiest to do early on, before lots of bad feeling has developed. However, it can be counter-productive to rush into a heated discussion when people are stressed and tired. Use your judgement about when and how to open up a discussion.

Activities

These roughly run in order, from beginning to end of the meeting:

Personal introductions

Lots of groups start meetings with an opportunity to hear from everyone. In a new group, that might be introducing yourselves and saying why you've come. In an established group, you might have a 'check-in' where everyone says how they are. If there are more than about 15 people, split into smaller groups, or keep contributions very short for this section.

Introducing the meeting

Check everyone has the same idea about what the meeting is for! Explain anything new people need to know about how to participate. For example, if you use consensus decision making, say what that means. Share information about the venue, e.g. toilets, kitchen, fire exits etc.

Agreeing the agenda

This may mean starting from scratch or checking over a proposed agenda drawn up in advance. Either way, agree a finish time, and then prioritise agenda items to make sure you can get through it all. Make sure

everyone can see the agenda, either as printed copies, or written up big.

Running through the agenda

Focus on one thing at a time, ideally in the order you agreed. If a new issue crops up, agree whether to leave it for another meeting, or if it needs to be addressed urgently. Remember, you don't need to use the same format all the way through the meeting. Look at the *Facilitation Tools* section for ideas on how you can vary what you are doing.

Next steps

Make sure everyone knows what happens next. For example, set a next meeting date. Check you have everyone's contacts to circulate minutes.

Evaluation

Reviewing how the meeting worked for different people can help a group learn together, and find a meeting style that suits everyone. This could be a short chat at the end. In a public meeting people might want to offer anonymous feedback. If an evaluation form feels too formal, people could write comments on post-it notes which they stick on the wall.

Closing

It can help build your group community if you finish the main agenda before your agreed time, and take a few minutes to do something together before you leave. For some people, a song, a short game, or a go-round to say how you are feeling would be perfect. Other people might hate it! Even a couple of minutes informal chat as you pack up can help. At the very least, pause to say goodbye to people who slip out early.

Social

Lots of groups follow a meeting with an informal social. Look for an option that works for everyone who wants to take part, e.g. a cafe that opens in the evenings, or sharing food within the meeting venue.



Facilitation tools

A few simple techniques can help to build variety into your meetings, to help more people engage. See more detail in our *Facilitation Tools* guide.

Go-rounds: Each person takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from anyone else. This can happen in order round the circle, or each person simply takes their turn when they're ready. Go-rounds are useful when it is important to hear from everyone, e.g. everyone giving their views on a controversial proposal. Writing up the question people are answering can help keep a go-round focused.

Small groups or pairs: Many people are more comfortable voicing their opinions in a smaller group. This can be a good way to give everyone a chance to work out what they think about an issue before joining in a whole group discussion on the topic. Or several small groups could work in parallel on different issues. If the small groups are feeding back into the main group, make sure you give them time to agree on key points they want to share, so everyone feels well-represented by the feedback.

Energisers: Most of us can stay focused for longer if we get a chance to move around and have a laugh. Some people will love short games and ice-breakers; other people will hate them! You could try offering a quick group game for everyone who wants to join in. Other options include a short break, chance to go outside, swapping seats, a few moments to stretch, or 'purposeful' activities with movement built into them.

Ideastorms: A technique to help to get lots of ideas out before you start evaluating and deciding what to do. Many people feel more creative when they know their suggestion won't be immediately criticised. Plus, thinking up lots of possibilities helps the group to not get stuck on the first idea. Announce the question, encourage 'thinking outside the box' and impractical suggestions, and write down every idea anyone shouts out. Ask people to hold back on commentary if they can. Emphasise that unworkable ideas may have the seeds of a new idea that would work.

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Meetings are an important way for people to come together for a common purpose - whether that's to plan an environmental campaign, offer mutual support or run your co-operative. Ideally, people leave a meeting feeling like they've had their say on the issues that affect them - and they're enthusiastic about any plans the group has come up with. Lots of us also like to feel that the meeting was focused and efficient! This guide offers practical tips on making your meeting productive, effective and inclusive.

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