

Running Effective Committee Meetings

RSA Committee meetings are vital to the effective functioning of the committee and its ability to carry out its role. They're the means by which the Committee exercises its collective responsibility for leading the RSA.

Meetings are necessary for decision making, reporting, review, problem solving and discussion but running purposeful and participative meetings can be challenging. Common experiences include:

- Long discussions with no conclusion
- Decision making on the basis of inadequate information
- Low attendance
- Uneven participation
- Unwillingness to ask questions

These issues are not easily addressed, but meetings can become more effective if they're well planned with a clear purpose, effectively chaired and focused on decision-making.

Planning meetings

RSA Committee meetings are more productive if they're planned beforehand. Responsibility for planning the meeting lies with the Chairperson along with the Secretary in smaller RSAs, and with the most senior staff member (generally the Manager/Secretary) in RSAs which employ staff. All RSA Committee members will need to ensure they have read any papers prior to the meeting and have added relevant items to the agenda.

How to plan effective meetings

- Set dates well in advance to maximize the number of members available to attend and don't forget to send a reminder notice
- Clarify the purpose or focus of the meeting

- Ensure that staff and financial reports are concise and easy to understand
- Ensure that minutes and agreed actions from the previous meeting is circulated, and that all papers for the upcoming meeting are sent out well in advance
- Agree the meeting agenda in advance
- Identify which agenda items require a decision and which are for information or discussion

Purpose of committee meetings

Planning your RSA Committee meetings is easier if the purpose of each meeting is clear. RSA Committee meetings are for:

- Monitoring and reviewing progress towards meeting the aims of the RSA
- Monitoring financial performance
- Ensuring all activities are consistent with your RSA's purpose and mission
- Considering applications for membership of the RSA
- Planning annual general meetings
- Initiating and reviewing internal and external policy positions and statements
- Deciding on management and governance systems and processes
- Deciding the most appropriate methods of funding raising and considering applications for funding
- Discussing and making decisions on new proposals
- Planning for the future and identifying new opportunities
- Delegating work
- Deciding on appropriate staffing requirements, staff terms and conditions

A well planned agenda should help you to clearly communicate the purpose and objectives of the meeting. Each individual meeting can also focus on one or two issues. Is there one or more development issues or proposals which require a decision? Should the financial report or the staff report be considered early in the meeting because it was at the bottom of the agenda at the last meeting and did not receive sufficient attention?

Effective chairing

Chairing is a key factor in the effectiveness of meetings. The role of the Chair is to direct discussion of the Committee, ensuring that the objectives of the meeting can be met, and that the Committee effectively fulfils its responsibility in consideration of the items on the agenda. This involves ensuring that you are well briefed about each agenda item and that:

- Decisions are taken, recorded and carried out
- The RSA's policies are applied
- There is full participation
- The agenda is followed
- There are time limits for the meeting as a whole and for agenda items.

Productive meetings require the contribution of all members of the Management Committee, working as a team and taking joint responsibility for ensuring that issues are given due consideration and decisions taken.

Decision making

RSA committees are responsible for taking major strategic decisions and need to take these jointly with other members. In making any big decision, a number of steps are involved, including some or all of the following:

- Information - ensuring the committee has read or heard all relevant information
- The goal - what is our aim and is it consistent with the aim and direction of the RSA. Agreement on the goal is a crucial stage in decision making
- Choices - what choices are available to us and what are the constraints
- The plan - how do we achieve our goal - what are the steps and what resources do we need

There are other situations where it is sensible to delegate the power to make day to day decisions to the Manager/Secretary or to a working group for example to work out the details of carrying out a policy which the whole committee has agreed to.

Decision making is much more effective if the committee establishes not only what is to be done but also how and when it will be done and by whom. There are two common methods of making decisions:

By consensus

By taking a vote

Some RSAs have a strong commitment to consensual decision making and only take a vote in exceptional circumstances. Others routinely vote on issues.

Regardless of how decisions are taken, all committee members should be clear about exactly what has been decided and decisions should be clearly recorded in the minutes.

Don't forget that each RSA committee member has a contribution to make to effective meetings. All members should:

- Prepare for meetings
- Forward apologies if you're unable to attend
- Use your agenda
- Listen to the speakers
- Learn from other people
- Speak up when you have something to say
- Ask questions if you are unclear or unsure
- Consider all the options and share your views
- Abide by decisions which are taken, whether you agree with them or not