

# How to improve your chairing skills

The Resource Centre held two workshops on chairing meetings in March 2016. These were attended by twelve people from nine different Tenant and Resident Associations.

At the workshops we discussed situations which often arise when you are chairing meetings. This is a summary of the tips and advice which came out of these workshops, on the following topics:

- ♦ Unfocussed meetings page 2
- ♦ Quiet people and dominant people page 4
- ♦ Feeling nervous page 6
- ♦ Repetitive meetings page 8
- ♦ Single issue group page 10

If you would like to read more about chairing meetings, turn to page 12 for details of more Resource Centre information sheets on related topics.

## Scenario one

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**The people who come to your meetings aren't good at listening or sticking to the point.**

**They chat to each other, interrupt, and take discussions off at a tangent.**

**What can the Chair do about this?**

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- ♦ **Introduce yourself as the chairperson:** show from the start that you are taking responsibility for chairing the meeting:-
  - ◇ Start on time.
  - ◇ Clearly begin the meeting - stop chat and focus everyone on the business.
  - ◇ Make sure everyone has seen a copy of the agenda.
  
- ♦ **Have some rules:** as a group, agree some rules for your meetings. Start every meeting by reminding people of these until it comes naturally to everyone. Some examples of common rules:-
  - ◇ Raise your hands to speak, wait your turn.
  - ◇ Don't interrupt.
  - ◇ Stick to the point being discussed.
  - ◇ Don't chat to each other.
  
- ♦ **Stick to the rules yourself** and treat everyone the same.
  - ◇ Remind people about the rules if you need to. People need to trust that you will be wise and fair.
  
- ♦ **Have a system** to deal with a queue:
  - ◇ Keep a list of everyone who is waiting to speak. Call them in turn, crossing people off as they get to speak.
  - ◇ If someone has their hand up, catch their eye and nod slightly. They can then put their hand down.
  - ◇ From time to time read out the people who are on your list and waiting to speak.
  - ◇ Make sure you don't ignore people who have their hand up in favour of those who are interrupting.
  
- ♦ **Have an agenda:** prepare this in advance, possibly with another committee member.
  - ◇ Think about the items people want to discuss in advance - don't let everything come up under 'any other business'.

- ◇ Invite people to suggest agenda items in advance.
- ◇ Check the minutes of the last meeting.
- ◇ Think about how long items will take to discuss and put in some rough timings to guide you.
  
- ◆ **Keep people to the agenda:** if people raise points that are off on a tangent, acknowledge the point they are making and suggest an appropriate place to deal with it. This might be later in the agenda, outside the meeting or with a housing officer. Then bring the meeting back to the point you were discussing.
  
- ◆ **Be clear, precise and informative:** people's attention will wander if you use bewildering jargon, or don't explain what you are talking about, or talk for too long.
  
- ◆ **Pay attention:** chairing a meeting takes concentration. You need to know who is waiting to speak and how people are responding. The people at the meeting need to be confident that you are aware of what is going on.
  - ◇ Organise the space well
  - ◇ If it's a small meeting put the chairs in a circle
  - ◇ Ask if everyone can hear
  - ◇ If it's a large meeting, consider using a microphone.
  - ◇ If there is lots of empty space, ask people to move closer together.
  - ◇ Make sure the room is not too hot or too cold.
  
- ◆ **Structure social time** at the start or end for those who want to chat.

## Scenario two

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**There are some people who often come to your meetings but never say anything. One or two people talk a lot and tend to dominate. What can the Chair do about this?**

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- ♦ **Be friendly and welcoming:**
  - ◇ Talk to new people before and after the meeting.
  - ◇ Find out why people are there, what they are interested in.
  - ◇ Involve other group members – for example give someone the job of welcoming new people as they arrive.
  
- ♦ **Introduce people:**
  - ◇ At the start of the meeting, introduce yourself, guests and committee members.
  - ◇ Say if someone has a particular role in the meeting, such as the minute-taker.
  - ◇ In a small meeting, get everyone to introduce themselves.
  - ◇ In social time before and after the meeting, introduce newcomers to other people.
  
- ♦ **Think about your body language when chairing:**
  - ◇ Make eye contact, smile, and nod, try to be relaxed and open.
  
- ♦ **Have some rules:** as a group, agree some rules for your meetings. Start every meeting by reminding people of these.
  
- ♦ **Keep everyone to the rules:** don't let some people get away with things because they are louder or more forceful.
  
- ♦ **Create a level playing field:**
  - ◇ Don't use jargon or abbreviations.
  - ◇ Introduce items clearly and explain any background.
  - ◇ Listen carefully to everyone and acknowledge contributions.
  
- ♦ **Invite people to contribute:** it's often useful to ask questions -
  - ◇ "Does anyone else have any thoughts on this?"
  - ◇ "Does anyone have any experience in this area?"
  - ◇ "Is there anyone who hasn't talked yet who'd like to speak?"
  
- ♦ **Structure discussions to allow more contributions:**

- ◇ At a small meeting - ask everyone there to say, in turn, what they think about the item under discussion. Let everyone have their say before taking other contributions.
- ◇ If it's a large meeting ask people to discuss the issue in pairs or small groups.
- ◆ **Give priority to people who haven't spoken already:**  
(but tell everyone you are doing this) eg, "I'm going to take Jane before other people waiting because she hasn't spoken yet."
- ◆ **Allow people to speak, but move them on.**  
Give people the chance to have their say, but don't let them hog the show. It can help to have some set phrases you use to do this, eg:
  - ◇ "Thank-you for your interesting contribution, we've got a lot to cover so I'm going to move on now..."
  - ◇ "We've spent quite a lot of time on this topic and need to move on so everyone gets a chance to speak..."
- ◆ **Prepare an agenda in advance**
  - ◇ Talk to people to find out what they want on the agenda.
  - ◇ Make sure everyone's concerns are covered.
  - ◇ Stick to the agenda, or agree any changes with the meeting.
- ◆ **Find out about your group members:** talk to them, follow things up with them, and encourage them.
- ◆ **Organise the space well**
  - ◇ Putting the chairs in a circle can make it easier for everyone to join in, and they are less likely to feel like spectators.
  - ◇ Make sure everyone can hear.

### Scenario three

**Chairing meetings can be quite daunting, especially when you first start to do it. People often feel anxious about being the centre of attention, and worried about how they will keep control of the meeting.**

#### What suggestions do we have to help people?

- ♦ **Support them:**
  - ◇ Gradually introduce people into the role, perhaps starting off as the vice-chair.
  - ◇ As a group, agree some rules by which you will run your meetings and all stick to them.
  - ◇ Work as a team – divide up tasks and share responsibilities.
- ♦ **Prepare well:**
  - ◇ Read through the minutes of the previous meeting.
  - ◇ Have an agenda, with some idea of how long you expect each item to take.
  - ◇ Work with the secretary or another group member on this.
- ♦ **Prepare an introduction:** jot down a few notes covering basic issues:
  - ◇ Introduce yourself as the Chair.
  - ◇ Any information about toilets, fire regulations, phones.
  - ◇ Tell people when the meeting will end.
- ♦ **Speak up:**
  - ◇ Consciously speak louder than normal.
  - ◇ If you find this hard, practise beforehand.
- ♦ **Think about your body language:**
  - ◇ Sit still, looking up and forward.
  - ◇ Make eye contact – look directly at people.
  - ◇ Look round regularly at everyone.
  - ◇ Taking deep breaths helps to help calm nerves.
- ♦ **Start the meeting decisively:** “Can I have everyone’s attention, we’re going to start the meeting now…” also end it decisively.
- ♦ **Appeal to the group:** tell people they are making life difficult!
  - ◇ Re-agree rules: “can I just check that everyone wants to stick to these…”

- ♦ **Use other people in the group:** ask someone else to introduce a particular item (tell them in advance).
- ♦ **If a situation arises you don't know how to deal with:**
  - ◇ This is unlikely to happen much – don't worry in advance.
  - ◇ Don't expect to be able to deal with everything, especially if it's the first time.
  - ◇ It's not necessarily up to you to make a decision or sort out a difficult situation - ask the meeting.
  - ◇ Sometimes it helps to have a short break – it gives you a bit of time, and can diffuse a tense situation.
- ♦ **Keep it in perspective:**
  - ◇ It's OK to make mistakes, it's part of learning.
  - ◇ If you get something wrong it's not going to lead to an international disaster...
- ♦ **Learn from other people**
  - ◇ When you are at other meetings, think about the chairing and what is working well or not so well.
  - ◇ After you've chaired a meeting, ask people for some feed-back and suggestions for improvement.

## Scenario four

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**Your meetings feel very repetitive. People raise the same problems every time and want to describe them in a lot of detail. It feels like the meetings are dominated with moaning about problems.**

### **What can the Chair do about this?**

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♦ **Prepare:**

- ◇ Read the minutes of the previous meeting.
- ◇ Think about what is blocking progress and what needs to happen to move things forward.
- ◇ Chase things up – check whether everyone has done what they said they would and what progress has been made.
- ◇ Work with your committee – you might want to prepare the agenda with someone else.

♦ **Introduce** items clearly with up to date information:

- ◇ Give a bit of background to the item, so people don't feel they need to explain the problem again.
- ◇ Report on what the Association has agreed to do about it in the past.
- ◇ Inform people about where you have got with this, and what the question for the meeting now is.

♦ **Ask questions:** help people focus on what the group is going to do next, rather than the details of the issue itself.

- ◇ "Do you have an idea what we could do next about this?"
- ◇ "We've already discussed the problem in a lot of detail, now we are focusing on the solution."
- ◇ "What can we do to resolve this?"
- ◇ "We've done xxxx, xxxx and xxxx about this. Is there anything else we can do?"

♦ **Are you taking your issues to the right person?**

- ◇ Make sure you are talking to the person who actually has the power to sort the issue out.
- ◇ Think about the different ways you can raise your concerns, and what is likely to be most effective in any particular situation.

♦ **Has a particular issue run its course?**



- ◇ Remind people of everything you've already tried.
- ◇ Ask people if they think it would be best to put the issue to bed for now, and focus on something more positive.
- ◇ If one or two people are very vocal but other people aren't, you could invite a show of hands to find out if people want to keep discussing it.
  
- ◆ **Make a decision before moving on**
  - ◇ Try to pull together the points people are making and suggest a constructive way forward: "it seems that we all agree xxx " or "there are two options we've discussed, xxx and xxx. We need to decide which of these we want"
  - ◇ Make sure the meeting does decide what you will do, who will do it and when it will be done.
  - ◇ Give the secretary time to get this down in the minutes.
  
- ◆ **Introduce new items:**
  - ◇ If the meetings are becoming repetitive, think in advance about items for the next agenda that will generate new discussions.

## Scenario five

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**A small group of people, who never usually come to meetings, turn up at your General Meeting.**

**They have come because they are very upset about a new building going up on a site immediately in front of their homes. They are angry with the Tenant Association for not having done enough about this. It is all they want to talk about.**

**What can the Chairperson do in this situation?**

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- ♦ **Remind everyone of the meeting rules:**
  - ◇ Ask people to put their hand up, listen to each other, not interrupt, be polite etc.
- ♦ **Consider a change to the agenda:**
  - ◇ You could make changes to the agenda to include this topic. Spell out what else in the agenda you will have to adjust and how much time you will give this item eg, "I propose we spend half an hour talking about this, then discuss items 1-4 on the agenda, and leave items 5 and 6 until the next meeting."
  - ◇ Ask the meeting as a whole to agree the new agenda.
- ♦ **Give them time to make their case:**
  - ◇ Listen to what they have to say.
  - ◇ Think about the content of what they are saying, rather than responding to the way in which they are saying it.
  - ◇ Repeat back to them what you have understood the problem to be.
- ♦ **Make positive suggestions about how to deal with the issue eg,**
  - ◇ A special meeting where the building work is the sole topic.
  - ◇ A small group meeting to take up the issue.
- ♦ **Who is responsible?**
  - ◇ Be clear who has responsibility for things and direct people to the right place.
  - ◇ Let people know that you are also a tenant and no different to them – you aren't responsible for mistakes made by the Council or contractors.
- ♦ **Dealing with criticism:**
  - ◇ If someone is continually criticising try to turn the question around to them eg, "What suggestions do you have for how this could be improved?"

♦ **Dealing with an argument:**

- ◇ If two people get into a heated discussion which is dominating the meeting in a negative way, intervene to stop them.
- ◇ A constructive way of doing this is to summarise the main points made by each of them, then ask what other people think about the issues. This takes the focus away from the individuals and broadens the discussion.
- ◇ It can help to have a quick break.

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## More information

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If you would like to read more about chairing meetings, the Resource Centre has also produced the following information sheets.

These are available on our website [www.resourcecentre.org.uk](http://www.resourcecentre.org.uk), or we can provide printed copies if you contact us at 01273 606160 or [info@resourcecentre.org.uk](mailto:info@resourcecentre.org.uk).

- ♦ Chairing a meeting

What chairing a meeting involves, and how to do it. Some useful tips and advice to help improve and develop your chairing skills.

- ♦ Roles of Officers

Guidance to the jobs generally taken on by the Chair, Secretary and Treasurer and working together in a committee.

- ♦ AGM Checklist

Organising your Annual General Meeting

- ♦ Taking Minutes

A quick and easy guide to taking minutes