

Chairing skills

Councillor workbook



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This councillor workbook includes references to materials published by the Local Government Group (LG Group), and Local Government Improvement and Development (LG Improvement and Development), now both the Local Government Association (LGA).

Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members. It makes no judgment about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. If you fall into the former category the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics that enable you to chair meetings effectively.

For members who are new to local government, the workbook provides essential guidance on the nature of the chairing role and some tried and tested methods for handling the various meetings you may be asked to attend.

The workbook can be used as a stand-alone learning aid or as an adjunct to other material you may cover. It offers few firm rules for members as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to use and develop their influencing skills, based on individual preference and confidence. As such, the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

In practical terms, the document will take between two to three hours to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about your own approach in influencing other people - how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent.

In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about your role in chairing meetings. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are ‘pen pictures’ of approaches used by other people or organisations.



Hints and tips – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information and support, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendices to the workbook.

Chairing skills

Why effective chairing is important

Meetings are a traditional and essential component of local government. For both members and managers, meetings serve as a forum for discussion and agreement, planning and monitoring, communication and leadership. Used appropriately, meetings can challenge, inspire, illuminate and inform. And while they are not the only meetings that members will be asked to attend, committee meetings, in particular, are a mainstay of the political management process.



What is a chair?

Any chair has two main roles - neither of which is about being sat on:

- To represent the council at formal and informal meetings and ensure that discussions are carried out in accordance with the council's constitution and procedural rules.
- To make sure that meetings are run effectively and inclusively, in line with any agreed agenda, to deal with the business at hand. This will include preparation and follow-up, as well as taking charge during the meeting itself.

Nobody wants to attend an unfocused and unproductive meeting. It's a waste of everyone's time. Formal group discussions need focus and direction to stop them becoming just social 'chit chat' or a rambling discourse on the state of world affairs. And open debate needs a degree of stewardship, to enable all views to be heard and conclusions to be based on reasoned arguments, consensus or compromise. This is the essential role of the chairperson or 'chair'.

Effective chairing is important because it can:

- **Provide for clear leadership and direction** – ensuring that discussions are held within some framework for debate, ie based on an agreed agenda and adhering to established ground rules, standing orders or protocols for how the business should be conducted.
- **Ensure that debates are focused and balanced** – involving discussion from all of those who wish to articulate a view, particularly where conflicting viewpoints are being expressed.
- **Enable decisions to be reached** – allowing participants to agree on the way forward and any further action that needs to be taken, eg for the allocation of resources to meet agreed priorities.

- **Contribute to group or team working**
– allowing people to build rapport and contribute to group/committee discussions. This can often help to inform, unite and inspire people.

- **Ensure that resources are used to best effect** – saving time and energy and allowing information, views and evidence to be gathered in an efficient and timely manner.



Exercise 1 – your recent experience of chairing meetings

Think about any recent meetings you have attended which were chaired by other people. Write down a list of some of the positive and negative ways that the chairs in these meetings attempted to manage the discussions:

Positive aspects of chairmanship you observed

Negative aspects of chairmanship you observed

The remaining sections of this workbook will consider all aspects of the chairing role and some approaches and tactics you can consider in improving your effectiveness as a chair and tackling some of the positives and negatives you have outlined above.

The key roles of a chair

There are no hard and fast rules about how you chair a meeting. The approach you take and the style you adopt will depend largely on the nature of the meeting, the people involved and your own personality. That aside, there are some key roles that most chairs adopt:

- **The spokesperson** – summing up other people's views and being comfortable to put these across to all kinds of people, including large groups.
- **The organiser** – making sure that everyone is prepared for meetings and knows when and where they are going to be and what is going to be discussed. For most formal committee meetings, the mechanics of this will be undertaken by your committee clerks.
- **The communicator** – making sure that everyone understands what is going on before, during and after the meeting.
- **The action person** – making sure that meetings are not just a 'talking shop' but have a purpose and result in action.
- **The mediator** – sometimes finding a compromise between two people or two conflicting ideas - being fair and not letting your own feelings get in the way.

Sometimes these roles can be delegated to others, although it is important to recognise that the chair will retain the overall responsibility. For example, if you are not the world's most efficient organiser, you may prefer to work closely with your vice-chair or one of the council's committee clerks in ensuring that all of the practical arrangements for running meetings are covered effectively.



Top tips for effective chairs

- Know the issues and topics being discussed – read the background papers, chat to fellow members and get briefings from your officers.
- Understand the other group members – get to know the personalities and who helps or hinders your role.
- Know how things should be done – get to know the council's standing orders - without having to look them up.
- Be active outside meetings – build support and rapport with group members and encourage ideas/ contributions from people outside of the committee/group.

The meetings you may be asked to chair

Many of the meetings you chair will be formal committee meetings (eg full council, overview and scrutiny or regulatory committees) or 'task group' meetings with officers and/ or partner agencies. These will need to be chaired in accordance with the council's constitution and standing orders and any other procedures or 'protocols' that apply. Your officers will be able to brief you on the full extent of your responsibilities in chairing these meetings.



Sheffield City Council – encouraging public contributions

Sheffield City Council has produced some online advice for members of the public who wish to attend and provide information to its scrutiny meetings. The 'Scrutiny Witness Charter' provides information on what to expect at meetings and tips for giving evidence and claiming expenses.

<http://tinyurl.com/7qwqw8>

Outside of this, however, you may also be asked to chair other group discussions, eg public meetings, board meetings for voluntary or community groups, appointment panels, committees of enquiry etc. The nature of these meetings may require you to modify your approach, eg:

- **Setting, tone and style** – some meetings may be better held in settings outside of council buildings to reduce the perceived 'formality' of the discussions. It may also be advisable to chair the meeting in a more relaxed style, eg allowing people to talk to, question and challenge others without going 'through the chair'.
- **Encouraging contributions** – discussing and deciding things 'by committee' may work well for much of the council's business, but may hinder group discussions elsewhere. It may be useful to think about breaking a large gathering into smaller task groups to enable more people to contribute or to find other ways to maximise the inputs from those attending.

- **Reaching decisions** – not everyone will be comfortable to commit to decisions arrived at in a group meeting, eg some people will need time to think through the actions proposed or may need to seek approval from the people they represent before signing up. As chair, you will need to manage people's expectations about what is realistic and achievable.



Guidance on holding public meetings

The 'Councillor Information' section of the Local Government Improvement and Development (LG Improvement and Development) website contains a feature on 'Holding Public Meetings' and provides useful advice on how to encourage people to turn up, choose a suitable venue, make a good start, keep control and get the most from your meeting.

<http://tinyurl.com/blsyhk8>



Exercise 2 – chairing different types of meeting

As a member you may be asked to chair different types of meetings in addition to the more traditional committee meetings you may be familiar with. Imagine you have been asked to chair the following. Write down how your approach might differ for each, in terms of; (a) the setting, style and tone of the meeting, and (b) how you could encourage useful contributions from those attending:

A public meeting to discuss the growing racial tensions in your ward:

(a) _____

(b) _____

A scrutiny meeting, with 'expert witnesses' from the health and community sectors, to discuss the action needed to address the local increase in rates of teenage pregnancy:

(a) _____

(b) _____

Look again at the ideas you have written down. Are you sure that the setting and style would help to create the right atmosphere for discussion? Would your approach encourage good contributions from a wide range of participants? It is likely that this style of meeting would produce some ideas for action, ie some tangible things that could be done to address the concerns expressed by people. If not, why not?

Handling the mechanics of any meeting

There are a number of basic tasks that need to be undertaken by the chair for any committee or group meeting. This includes action before, during and after the meeting:



Chairing – the mechanics

Before the meeting	During the meeting	After the meeting
Clarify the meeting's objectives.	Create a good first impression – welcome people and clarify roles and responsibilities.	Summarise key points - who will do what and by when.
Ensure that the right people are invited to attend.	Focus on what the meeting must achieve and gain commitment to the agenda.	Ensure the minutes record key agreements, facts, opinions or quotes.
Ensure that all necessary documents are produced.	Establish the ground rules.	Agree details for the next meeting.
Check the venue is suitably equipped and set out.	Steer discussions in a structured way - manage the time and personalities.	Thank everyone for their contribution.
Develop some contingency plans for nonattendance.	Encourage a wide variety of views and opinions.	Ensure that follow up takes place, ie progress on agreed action points.
Prepare yourself - mentally and physically.		

Preparation is crucially important and chairs need to have read all agenda items and background papers before any meeting. You may also wish to consult with other members, officers, partner agencies, ward groups or constituents on non-confidential items. Being fully briefed and confidently prepared to discuss all of the matters on the agenda will help you to concentrate on managing the timetable, discussions and personalities at the meeting - the latter may not be so easily planned for!

Encouraging participation and discussion

As a chair, your most important tasks during the meeting are to encourage participation and prompt discussion. This is primarily about creating the best conditions for others to engage in debate and come forward with their opinions and suggestions. Only through dialogue can you understand what people think and where they stand on any given subject. If you are concerned about the degree of participation in your group, consider the following:

- Are there only one or two main contributors to most debates?
- Are there noticeably silent people in the group?
- Does there look to be a rigid 'contribution hierarchy', where some people are reluctant to speak unless others have done so?
- Is there a gender bias or any other form of cultural bias?
- Does more than one person talk at once and do others appear not to listen?

If the answer to any of these is 'yes', you might like to consider the two main ways in which you can encourage greater participation:

- **Asking open and searching questions** – probing, testing and challenging others through questioning to enable you to gather information and get to the nub of any issue under discussion.
- **Listening actively** – encouraging people to speak through 'active listening', ie using nods, eye contact, silence, smiles and comments to prompt others to share their views.



Effective questioning

To prompt discussion you can use a range of techniques:

Closed questions – direct questions that require a one word answer, eg 'yes' or 'no'.

Open questions – the 'how', 'why' and 'what' type of questions that require a more expansive response.

Leading/limiting questions – questions designed to limit the range of possible answers, eg 'Is it true that...?'

Soft commands – prompts which sound like questions to elicit information, eg 'Perhaps you could explain...'

Paraphrasing/summarising – repeating what you have heard and asking for a confirmation of accuracy.

Questioning is a powerful and essential tool for any chair. Good questioning can enable you to:

- get to the 'heart of the matter'
- gather evidence and clarify and expand on initial views or early information
- elicit information without making respondents feel intimidated or prejudged
- facilitate inclusion, buy-in and ownership of problems and build rapport with people.

However, effective questioning is not always as easy as it sounds and will require you to think about:

- What purpose the questioning is designed to serve, eg to illicit information, challenge, prompt, test or encourage. Identifying possible questions in advance of the meeting is a good tip.
- Making the person being questioned feel comfortable – particularly those not used to public meetings, eg using their name, talking in plain English, allowing them time for a response, summarising what they have said and using positive body language (ie nodding, giving good eye contact and looking attentive).
- Using the most appropriate questions to get the best response and information, eg by their nature, ‘open’ questions should elicit a more expansive response than ‘closed’ questions, which can feel intimidating to those being questioned.

A good way of putting all of this together is to use linked phrases to move smoothly from one type of question to another, eg “You mentioned earlier that...” It is also worth watching for some of the non-verbal signals that people send out (ie their body language and tone) to ensure that the words people use are consistent with the other messages they are conveying!



Exercise 3 – preparing your questions before the meeting

Case study - waste crime clampdown

Fly-tippers were among the targets during the biggest crackdown on waste crime ever in the district. Almost 100 commercial vehicles were pulled over for spot checks at a border patrol in the district during January. All were asked to produce their vehicle documents.

Council staff and partner agencies were particularly on the lookout for traders who charge businesses or homeowners for the removal of waste and then fly-tip illegally.

Nineteen notices were issued for offences and five investigations were started which could lead to prosecutions. People were also arrested or fined for other offences:

- three vehicles were seized by the police for insurance offences
- two businesses will be prosecuted for trading standards offences
- two uniforms and false paperwork were seized.

Imagine you have been asked to chair a meeting to discuss the issues arising from the 'waste crime clampdown' in your council. Identify below any questions you would want to raise at the meeting:

Handling conflict – dealing with the personalities

Chairing council meetings can sometimes be a demanding process because of the personalities involved. People respond in different, sometimes unpredictable, ways when trying to convince others of their point of view - particularly when this is overlaid with the essential politics of local government. Arguments are common and conflict is not unusual. This is true enough in one to one situations, but is particularly so in group meetings. A number of psychologists have put forward theories of 'group dynamics' to explain this phenomenon.

A basic appreciation of how 'group dynamics' works is useful in understanding the ways in which groups of people tend to behave when brought together on a shared task or activity. This can have a big impact on your ability to chair meetings effectively.



Tuckman's theory of 'group dynamics'

In 1965, D Tuckman set out his theory of 'group dynamics' in an article for the Psychological Bulletin*. He observed that different groups of people tend to go through a similar lifecycle of stages in working together:

1. Forming - coming together as a group, finding out about each other, deciding what the group's concerns and emphases should be.
2. Storming - coming to terms with differences within the group.
3. Norming - agreeing objectives, priorities, procedures and ways of relating to each other.
4. Performing - getting on with the work, without having to spend a lot of time and energy deciding what needs doing and how it should be done.

Tuckman's model was developed further by Michael Argyle in his book Social Interaction.

* Tuckman, D.W. Developmental Sequence in Small Groups, Psychological Bulletin 1965, 63(6) 284-299

Recognising that people often behave differently in groups can help you, tactically, to be more effective in chairing meetings. Much of this is about watching and listening to group behaviour and exercising your own judgement about when to intervene and when to sit back as discussions unfold and people exchange views or come into conflict. For example:

- **Who contributes the most and least to group discussions** – are they aware of it and could you challenge them?
- **Who are the silent people** – is their silence about dissent or fear and could your intervention encourage them to be more vocal?
- **What is the atmosphere in the group** – could you mediate to create more congenial conditions?
- **Have the discussions reached a sticking point** – could you broker some negotiation or compromise to move things forward?
- **Does anybody impose their decisions on others** – could you ask for a secret ballot to prevent this?
- **Who are the rebels, bullies, critics and scapegoats** – can you employ different tactics to deal with each?

Handling the personalities is a key part of the chairing role. Similarly, you can expect a fair amount of political wrangling in council meetings. You are there to manage these debates and to remain impartial wherever possible. If you can avoid being the source of political disagreements that will help and being able to articulate the areas of common ground should help to build some consensus on the contentious issues.



Handling tips

The aggressor – acknowledge the aggression in a neutral manner without taking sides (eg ‘You appear to be passionate about the idea of...’) and intervene by saying something like, ‘Councillor X has given us his view that...what do others think?’ If the aggression persists, you could consider adjourning the meeting to let tempers cool and remind the aggressor of his/her responsibilities.

The dormouse – don’t assume that their silence is any sign of disinterest. Ask them regularly whether they have any views to contribute and listen actively when they do. If the silence persists, chat to them outside of the meeting and ask if they are happy with their role.

The rambler – watch the group’s body language for any signs of frustration and use polite questions or interventions to move the conversation on. If the problem persists, you may wish to consider having a time limit for individual contributions – but make sure this applies to all.

One of the key relationships here is likely to be with the vice-chair of the committee or meeting. It is not uncommon for vice-chairs to be chosen from a different political grouping to that of the chair. Whatever their political differences, the chair and vice-chair will need to work in close harmony, so it's worth taking steps to build some rapport:

- **Treat each other with respect** – put aside any personal agendas, rivalries and differences you may have and focus on the business at hand.
- **Discuss and agree your respective roles** – who will do what and when, including the arrangements required when one of you is unable to attend a meeting.
- **Build some trust and understanding** – delegate some of your duties if both of you are comfortable with this.
- **Ask for feedback on your role and performance** – listen to what they have to say and show them you have taken this seriously by changing or modifying your approach.



Exercise 4 – dealing with the personalities

Imagine you are chairing a meeting and are confronted with the following characters. Identify what tactics you would employ to deal with each:

A noisy and aggressive member who insists on shouting people down when they disagree with him?

A persistently quiet member who looks attentive but rarely says anything without being prompted?

A member who has a tendency to be long-winded in sharing her thoughts with the group to the agitation of others?

The legalities of council meetings

Local authorities are creatures of statute and can only do what is in their legal powers. Similarly, individual members must operate within both a legal and ethical framework – and this covers the meetings they attend.

The council's legal staff will be able to talk you through the legalities and constitutional rules of attending and chairing council committees and meetings. They will also be able to explain the conventions on ethics and probity and the standards of conduct expected of members.

In addition to this, chairs should also be aware of the legalities surrounding 'privilege' (see text box) and 'confidentiality'. The Access to Information Act 1985 defines some information as being 'exempt' from open, or public, discussion. These items can only be discussed in a closed session of any committee, away from the press or public gaze, and members must treat the information as confidential.

However, it is not uncommon for committee members to ask for an item to be moved to the 'closed' sections of the agenda in order to avoid embarrassment, eg where a political decision has led to some breakdown in service delivery, but the facts of the matter are not confidential. Unless there is a clear justification for doing so, the chair should avoid agreeing to members' requests in these situations. If there are any doubts about the legalities involved, the council's legal staff should again be consulted.



Privilege – the law of defamation

The law of defamation is potentially a dangerous and expensive one for councillors. Councillors can be sued for defamation by saying or writing anything that will "lower a person in the estimation of right-thinking people".

Councillors have some limited protection and to allow them freedom of speech they are given qualified privilege in council meetings. This can protect them against being sued for defamation for something they say in defending or supporting the interests of their council, or as part of their duty. But it applies only if they honestly believed what they said and were not motivated by malice.

Defamation is a complex matter and councillors should take advice from the council's solicitor if a difficult situation is likely to arise.

'Councillor's Guide' (2011/12), LG Improvement and Development

Chairing for success – reaching and presenting decisions

While councils thrive on meetings, these are usually formal events, rather than social occasions, and often have one clear purpose – to make decisions.

Reaching decisions may require you, as chair, to act as negotiator, influencer or diplomat in enabling the group to reach a conclusion, consensus or compromise. The following tactics can help:

- **Aiming for ‘win/win’ agreements wherever possible** – so that everyone gets part of what they want.
- **Exploring options together** – being open to the idea that a third position may exist and that you can get to this idea through collaboration and discussion.
- **Listening first and talking second** – understanding where people are coming from before attempting to negotiate with them.
- **Describing what you see rather than being judgmental** – for example, “on the basis of what you’ve said, you don’t look to be supportive...”
- **Being empathetic** – showing you understand people’s situation, needs and feelings.
- **Maintaining your assertiveness** – but avoiding displays of unnecessary emotion (weakness or aggression) and unhelpful behaviours, eg irritators such as “I think what I’ve said is very reasonable”.

- **Keeping people and problems separate** – recognising that in many cases people are not just ‘being difficult’ – real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.

Having enabled the committee or group to reach its decisions, a final task is to ensure that the minutes of the meeting record these in a way that will ensure some action. This is usually in the form of ‘recommendations’, which should be ‘SMART’.

This is particularly important for overview and scrutiny committees which may be recommending action by a cabinet or executive. Any recommendations that are not SMART are unlikely to influence the real decision makers, so it’s worth spending some time getting the wording right.



SMART recommendations

Specific – clear about what is required and the evidence or argument to support any proposed direction.

Measurable – capable of being monitored and success or completion to be judged.

Action-oriented – focused on what needs to be done, rather than general notions of intent.

Realistic – grounded in the reality of the council’s situation, ie its staffing and financial capabilities.

Time-limited – set within clear deadlines, milestones or timetables for action.



Exercise 5 – identifying SMART recommendations

Read through the vague decisions below and write your own SMART recommendations, to turn these into action points that can be addressed by the council:

The committee agreed that the council should host a get together of interested local people from across the borough to have a discussion about possible ways of improving domestic waste collection services - all possible options to be considered.

The committee agreed that some ways of funding should be identified for improving the provision of leisure services (specifically parks and gardens) in the coming months with a view to increasing customer satisfaction.

Final summary

Meetings are part of the lifeblood of local government and good chairmanship can have many benefits. As an effective chair, you will need to understand the key roles that you have, how to handle the mechanics of different meetings and how best to encourage participation while dealing with the personalities you face. And all of this needs to be undertaken in the context of the rules and legalities that apply to your council meetings.

This may sound like a tall order, but like most things in life, chairing skills can be learnt and time and practice in the role will help to sharpen your confidence and abilities. Equally, it can be a rewarding and fulfilling role, allowing you to contribute to the essential workings of your council and learning skills that may be useful in the other aspects of your life.



“A committee is a group that keeps minutes and loses hours.”

Milton Berle, Comedian



Where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

(a) What key action points can you identify to improve the way you chair meetings, ie. what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

(b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Printed publications

Councillor's Guide 2012/13,
Local Government Association.

Social Interaction, Argyle, M.,
Tavistock Press.

The Facilitator's Handbook, Heron, J.,
Kogan Page.

The Role of the Non-Executive Member,
LG Improvement and Development.

Useful websites

www.local.gov.uk

The Local Government Association (LGA) website is a valuable source of help and advice for all those in local government.

www.cfps.org.uk

The website of the Centre for Public Scrutiny contains useful and specific information on chairing overview and scrutiny meetings.



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
We consider requests on an individual basis.