

Information Sheet No.13

How to make meetings work

Meetings are held so that a group of people can discuss issues and make decisions. Meetings do not always have to be run formally. Meeting styles can vary : from a traditional and formal structure to open and informal discussion. They don't have to be formal but whoever chairs the meeting will need to take responsibility for how well the committee functions. The important thing is that a group feels comfortable with its choice of operation so that it can successfully make decisions and follow them through.

Formal voting is likely to be a quick way of getting through a meeting's agenda but it may run the risk of alienating those who lose the vote and thereby damage the group's sense of unity.

Consensus on the other hand is agreement reached through a process of gathering viewpoints and through discussion and negotiation. The goal of consensus is to reach a final decision that everyone feels comfortable with although the group decision may not be unanimous. You may need a vote at the end to formally record the decision, especially financial ones as the auditor will require this. While consensus is often more difficult and takes more time, it is the ideal way for a participatory group to make decisions.

Finally, consider the needs of everyone who comes to the meeting. To make it work well, everyone should:

- focus on issues not on personalities
- confine the discussion to the topic
- listen to all members' points of view
- avoid speaking at great length
- avoid using jargon
- feel free to ask for explanations
- allow only one person to speak at a time
- avoid private conversations while someone else is speaking
- start on time and finish on time.

To review and discuss the way your P&C meetings are run, use the checklist on the next information sheet.

Sample agendas and sample minutes are available from the Council office. ★