

How to Set Up and Run a committee

A practical guide for community and voluntary groups

1. Purpose of this Guide

This guide provides a practical approach to setting up and running a committee in a community or voluntary organisation. It is designed to be straightforward and adaptable, recognising that every group operates differently.

It focuses on helping groups to put simple, effective structures in place so that decisions can be made clearly, work can be shared, and the organisation can operate in a sustainable way.

It is designed to support groups to put simple, effective structures in place so that:

- decisions can be made clearly
- work can be shared
- the organisation can operate sustainably

Every group is different. The aim is not to create a perfect structure, but one that works in practice.

2. Getting Started

Before setting up a committee, it is important to take a step back and be clear about what the organisation is trying to achieve.

A committee should support the work of the organisation, not add unnecessary structure.

At this stage, it is useful to consider:

- What is the purpose of the group
- What type of work will be carried out
- What kinds of decisions will need to be made

Starting simple is often the best approach. Many organisations begin with a small group and develop their structure over time as their work grows.

Getting Started – Quick Check

1. Is there a clear purpose for the organisation
2. Do you know what decisions need to be made
3. Is there a need to share responsibility
4. Are there enough people willing to be involved

3. Choosing a Structure

There is no single model that suits every organisation.

The structure should reflect the size of the group, the level of activity, and the capacity of those involved.

Most groups will have a main committee that takes responsibility for direction and decision-making. Where needed, smaller groups may be formed to focus on specific tasks or areas of work. These do not need to be overly formal, particularly in the early stages.

Keeping the structure manageable is key. Overly complex arrangements can make it harder for people to stay engaged and for decisions to be made efficiently.

4. Agreeing Roles

Clear roles help ensure that everyone understands what is expected and that responsibility is shared. While roles such as Chair, Secretary and Treasurer are common, what matters most is that the key functions are covered.

In simple terms, committees need to ensure that:

1. Meetings are organised and facilitated
2. Decisions are recorded
3. Communication is maintained
4. Finances are overseen (where relevant)

Roles do not need to be overly formal, but they should be clearly understood by everyone involved.

Simple Role Check

1. Do you know who is leading meetings

2. Do you know who is keeping records
3. Do you know who is overseeing finances
4. Is responsibility shared across the group

5. Bringing People Together

The effectiveness of a committee depends on the people involved. A good mix of skills, experience and perspectives can strengthen decision-making and support better outcomes.

It is important to be open about how people can get involved and to create an environment where participation is encouraged. At the same time, groups should be realistic about the level of commitment required.

Sharing responsibility from the outset helps to avoid over-reliance on a small number of individuals and supports long-term sustainability.

6. Starting the Work

The first meeting is an opportunity to establish how the committee will operate. It sets the tone for communication, decision-making and how work will be shared.

Rather than trying to cover everything, the focus should be on agreeing on a few key things:

What the committee is there to do

- How often it will meet
- How decisions will be made
- What the immediate priorities are

Simple, clear agreements at this stage will make it easier to move forward with confidence.

First Meeting Checklist

- Purpose of the committee agreed
- Roles discussed and assigned (even on a temporary basis)
- Meeting schedule agreed
- Immediate priorities identified
- Basic approach to decision-making agreed

7. Running Meetings

Meetings are central to how a committee functions. Well-run meetings support good discussion, clear decisions and ongoing progress.

In practice, this means having a clear agenda, allowing time for discussion, and ensuring that each meeting leads to agreed actions. It is also important to respect people's time by keeping meetings focused and purposeful.

Following each meeting, a short record of what was discussed and agreed should be shared. This helps ensure clarity and supports accountability.

Basic Meeting Structure

1. Welcome and agenda
2. Review of previous actions
3. Key items for discussion
4. Decisions and next steps
5. AOB (if needed)

8. Making Decisions

A clear and consistent approach to decision-making helps avoid confusion and supports trust within the group.

Many committees aim to reach agreement through discussion. Where this is not possible, a simple voting approach may be used. The key is that everyone understands how decisions are made and that the process is applied fairly.

Decisions should always be recorded and clearly communicated to ensure there is a shared understanding of what has been agreed.

What matters most is that:

- everyone understands how decisions are made
- the process is applied fairly
- decisions are recorded and communicated

9. Sharing Responsibility

Committees are most effective when responsibility is shared. If too much work falls on one or two people, it can lead to burnout and weaken the organisation over time.

A more balanced approach involves agreeing who is responsible for specific tasks and ensuring that work is distributed in a way that reflects people's strengths and availability.

This does not need to be rigid, but it should be clear enough to ensure that tasks are followed through.

Simple Action Tracker (Template)

Task	Person Responsible	Timeline	Status

10. Keeping Things Organised

Keeping simple, clear records supports continuity and transparency. It also makes it easier for new members to get involved and understand what has already been done.

Records should capture:

- What was discussed?
- What decisions were made?
- What actions were agreed?

These do not need to be detailed, but they should be consistent and accessible.

11. Supporting New Members

As committees evolve, new members will join. Taking time to support them helps ensure that they feel confident and able to contribute.

This can be done informally by explaining how the committee works, sharing key information, and providing opportunities to ask questions.

A supportive approach helps build confidence and strengthens the committee over time.

New Member Checklist

- Introduction to the group
- Provided with key documents
- Roles and processes explained
- Given an opportunity to ask questions

A supportive approach helps build confidence and strengthens the committee over time

12. Reflecting and Improving

Committees benefit from taking time to reflect on how they are working. This helps identify what is going well and where small improvements can be made.

Regular reflection does not need to be formal. Even a brief discussion can highlight areas for improvement and support better ways of working.

Being open to change helps ensure that the committee remains effective as the organisation develops.

13. Common Challenges

Many committees experience similar challenges, particularly as they grow or take on more work.

These may include

- unclear roles
- uneven workload
- meetings that lack focus.

These challenges are often a sign that something needs to be adjusted rather than a failure of the group. Clarifying roles, simplifying structures, and improving communication can usually address most issues.

Recognising and addressing challenges early helps maintain a positive and productive working environment.

Conclusion

Setting up and running a committee does not need to be complex.

How to Set Up and Run a committee

With a clear purpose, simple structures and shared responsibility, committees can provide a solid foundation for community and voluntary organisations.

The focus should always be on what works in practice. Keeping things clear, manageable, and inclusive will support long-term success.