

Sub-Committee Terms of Reference Guide (Working Guide)

A practical guide for community and voluntary groups

1. What is a Sub-Committee?

A sub-committee is a smaller group set up by a committee or board to focus on a specific area of work.

Sub-committees are often used to support areas such as events, communications, governance, or project work. They allow a smaller group to focus on a task in more detail and bring recommendations back to the main committee.

A sub-committee does not replace the main committee. It supports its work and operates under its direction.

2. What is a Terms of Reference?

A Terms of Reference (ToR) sets out the purpose, role, and way of working for a sub-committee.

It helps ensure there is clarity on:

- what the sub-committee is responsible for
- how it operates
- how it links back to the main committee

A clear ToR helps avoid confusion and ensures the sub-committee supports, rather than duplicates, the work of the group.

3. Why it matters

Sub-committees are often set up to focus on specific areas of work.

Without clear terms of reference, there can be confusion around roles, duplication of work, or uncertainty about decision-making and accountability.

A Terms of Reference helps keep the sub-committee focused, effective, and aligned with the overall aims of the organisation.

4. Relationship to the main committee

A sub-committee operates under the authority of the main committee or board.

It is important that the Terms of Reference clearly set out:

- that the sub-committee is accountable to the main committee
- what level of decision-making authority (if any) is delegated
- how the sub-committee reports back

In most cases, sub-committees make recommendations, with final decisions remaining with the main committee.

5. What should be included

A Sub-Committee Terms of Reference should clearly set out the following:

Purpose

This explains why the sub-committee exists and what it is set up to do. It should be short, clear, and linked to the overall aims or work plan of the organisation.

Scope of Work

This outlines the specific area the sub-committee will focus on. It should be clearly defined to avoid overlap with other parts of the organisation.

Role and Functions

This describes what the sub-committee will do in practice, such as carrying out tasks, developing proposals, supporting delivery of activities, or monitoring progress.

Membership

This explains who can be part of the sub-committee and how members are selected. It may include committee members, general members, or individuals with relevant skills. It should also be clear who approves membership.

Chair or Lead

This sets out who will lead the sub-committee and what their role is, including organising meetings, coordinating work, and acting as the link to the main committee.

Meetings

This explains how often the sub-committee will meet and how meetings will be managed. It does not need to be detailed but should give a clear sense of how the group will operate.

Reporting Arrangements

This is one of the most important sections. It should clearly explain how the sub-committee reports back to the main committee, how often updates are provided, and how recommendations are brought forward.

Decision-Making

This explains how the sub-committee makes decisions and what authority it has. In most cases, the sub-committee works by agreement and brings decisions or recommendations to the main committee.

Accountability

This confirms that the sub-committee operates in line with the organisation's constitution, policies, and agreed work plan.

Duration and Review

This outlines how long the sub-committee will operate. Some are set up for a specific task, while others may be ongoing. It is good practice to review sub-committees periodically.

Dissolution

This explains how and when the sub-committee can be closed, usually by decision of the main committee.

6. Good practice

Keep the Terms of Reference clear and proportionate. It should guide the work of the sub-committee without becoming overly detailed.

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Make sure roles, responsibilities, and reporting lines are clearly understood from the outset. If the role of the sub-committee changes, the Terms of Reference should be updated.

7. Final note

A well-defined Terms of Reference helps sub-committees work effectively and ensures they add real value to the organisation.

It provides clarity, supports accountability, and helps keep everyone aligned.