

*Chairing
physical
and
hybrid
meetings*

LGiU

Author: Miranda Smythe

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Physical meetings and general chairing tips

The role of the chair

The chairing role is not influenced by the type or style of a meeting: chairing is chairing which means that the purpose of the role does not change.

Although physical and virtual meetings may demand different skill sets, in general terms the chair of a committee is responsible for four key functions.

Organising the meeting

Whilst the administration of the meeting may be carried out by an Officer or Clerk, ultimately it is the responsibility of the chair to make sure that participants are notified, and that paperwork is sent out in good time.

Formal meetings may have time frames associated with the circulation of agendas and minutes built into the formal constitution.

Most chairs and sometimes the vice-chair too, will want to be involved in the construction of the meeting agenda, although sometimes this is a responsibility which belongs to the whole committee or group.

Keeping the meeting in order

This is an important duty because facilitation is critical to a committee's outcomes. The chair's responsibility for managing order within a meeting includes:

- Ensuring that participants stick to the agenda
- Following any rules or regulations which govern the meeting
- Keeping the meeting in order by controlling interruptions and irrelevant discussions
- Moving the meeting along at an appropriate pace
- Ensuring that quieter participants have an opportunity to participate.

Decision Making

It is the responsibility of the chair to ensure that any voting is conducted within the framework of the constitution and within standing orders.

Any decisions or actions which have been by meeting members must be clearly stated and sit within the terms of reference or meeting constitution.

Maintenance of records

Although formal council meetings will have an appointed Clerk, it is the responsibility of the chair to ensure that proper records are being maintained.

Skills of being an effective chair

Chairing a meeting involves a wide range of skills and approaches.

Flexibility

This means adapting and adjusting one's style according to the type of meeting, the topic and the participants.

More formal meetings obviously require a structured and 'official' approach, whereas community meetings may benefit from a more relaxed and informal style.

Confidence and authority

Meeting participants perform better in an environment where the chair is pleasantly confident and demonstrates surety in the meeting process.

Confidence is helped by being properly prepared, including participating in any pre-meeting processes and having a well-crafted agenda plus chairing notes which help keep the meeting on point.

This image of gravitas can also be enhanced through positive non-verbal behaviour and some chairs also consider their personal presentation and dress.

Fair-mindedness

Whilst it is possible that you are not going to agree with all the views expressed within a meeting, it is vital that you treat everyone with respect and give everyone a fair hearing. In a political environment balance is important and key to people's participation will be your reputation for ensuring you call on a variety of speakers rather than favouring people from one group.

Being a good listener

A good chair will aim to keep their talking contribution to a minimum, ensuring that members have an opportunity to participate. The chair's main contribution is often through introducing the meeting; setting the scene for each agenda item; summarising and then closing the meeting with clear next steps.

Sense of humour

Although if used inappropriately, humour can work against us, a light-hearted comment at the right time can reduce tension and bind people together.

Familiarisation with rules and procedures

Formal council meetings will have a legal constitution which means they are governed by strong structures and rules. Either you need to know these inside out, or you need to become good friends with your Clerk and sit next to them (or message them directly in a virtual meeting) so that they can provide you with clear guidance on how to proceed.

Being self-disciplined

This is an underrated trait, but is important because a disciplined chair will:

- turn up in good time for the meeting
- keep closely to the agenda and keep on point
- manage their own level of contribution
- interrupt only if this is needed to re-direct or maintain control
- be able to manage their own emotions, particularly in challenging situations
- hold back on their personal views on a topic: sometimes forever; on other occasions until everyone else has said their piece.

The rule of thirds

All meetings rely on certain activities. Some of these will take place before, some during or at the close of the meeting. Although the chair will not necessarily complete every activity themselves, they hold ultimate responsibility for ensuring they are carried out.

Before

- Be clear about the meeting's purpose
- Work out who should be there
- Engage in any pre-meeting activity, including consultation with others
- Develop an agenda, focussing on the most important and urgent points of business
- Circulate relevant paperwork
- Ensure the venue is organised and accessible
- Prepare own notes including opening the meeting and personal contributions during the meeting
- Organise the structure for debates
- Check with your clerk to see if they need anything from you

During

- Welcome people
- Open the meeting and set the scene
- Manage introductions
- Establish any ground-rules
- Run through main points the agenda will cover
- Organise each agenda item: Introduction – Body – Close
- Clarify key points
- Call on people to speak
- Summarise key points
- Maintain control
- Summarise main agreements
- Close the meeting positively and with clear next steps
- Thank meeting participants

After

- Liaise with the minute taker and check if any points need clarifying
- Check through draft copies of the minutes
- Ensure follow-ups on actions agreed

Planning the agenda

An agenda is a list of meeting activities in the order in which they are to be taken up. Traditionally the agenda will start with a welcome from the Chair and end with an official summary and close.

This is an important document and many chairs do not give it the attention it needs. The agenda briefs participants in the areas that the meeting will need to cover to achieve its objectives. It also forms the backbone of the meeting by providing all participants with a central point of reference.

For many formal committees, the structure of the agenda may be governed by the constitution or organisational custom and practice. This means that you may have little option but to follow precedent.

In situations where you are chairing a less formal meeting, you can build your own agenda using headings which work for the topic and for the group.

Community meetings often work better by avoiding a formally worded agenda in favour of a more friendly and approachable list of headings.

Structuring the agenda

When you have the freedom to write your own agenda, it is important to think very carefully about the flow of the meeting and how you plan to organise items so that there is a sense of priority and logic to the discussion.

Questions to ask yourself when you are planning an agenda include:

- Is this an item that is best dealt with early on when everyone is fresh?
- Is this item potentially high conflict? If it is, should I start with something 'safer' or should we just cut to the chase?
- Is there a link between this topic and other items which creates a definite running order?
- Is this item interesting to everyone or just a few people who are attending – in which case, would it be better to create separate discussions?
- Is this item urgent? If it is, we must deal with it early on in case we run out of time.
- Is this item important? In which case do I need to allow more time to discuss it?
- Is this item unimportant? In this instance should I put it lower down on the agenda so that if we run out of time it can drop off the bottom?
- Should I ask any visitors to be on first out of respect of their time management?

An agenda must also be realistic. This means being sensible about how many agenda items a group will be able to work their way through within a specific time.

Ten tips for being an effective chair

- 1.** Control the meeting by using the agenda. Keep to the item under discussion and work your way through, item by item. Change its order only when essential and then only with the consent of the members.
- 2.** Introduce each item in turn. Give it shape by briefly explaining its purpose and why it is on the agenda. State facts, not opinions. Be concise and avoid making long speeches.
- 3.** Call upon members one by one to speak. If a number indicate their wish to speak at the same time, place them in order so that they know when their turn is.
- 4.** Avoid always calling on the same speakers. Diffident members may need encouragement and will look to you to give it to them.
- 5.** Separate each subject under discussion. Do not let subjects become so entangled with each other that meeting members are not sure which item is being discussed. Clarify issues if they become obscure. If argument has led to confusion, it is your task to unravel the strands so that members know what they are being asked to decide.
- 6.** At the end of each item summarise what has been said and what decisions, if any, have been reached.
- 7.** If members have been delegated tasks to carry out after the meeting, make sure they understand what these are.
- 8.** Keep discussions to the time limits and make sure that you balance time fairly between meeting members.
- 9.** Make sure that all members have an equal chance to express their views on each item before going on to the next.
- 10.** Keep the meeting moving and on course in a firm but polite manner.

The tricky ones

Someone once commented that “chairing a meeting would be fine except for the people”. Without doubt, some meetings can be challenging although with thought and proper preparation, many issues can be minimised.

Issues you may face as a Chair include

1. Poor time keeping
2. Loss of direction
3. Domineering members
4. Conflict and aggression
5. A poor finish.

Poor time keeping

Start on time! The chair is responsible for keeping on schedule and meeting members can help this by being punctual. Unless you are not quorate, which is an issue, demonstrate punctuality by starting and finishing on schedule.

Loss of direction

To ensure that you are keeping the meeting on track, make use of the following approaches:

1. *Refocussing*

Stop and remind the members of the purpose of the meeting or topic.

2. *Summarising*

If you sense that the meeting has lost its way, try a summary. This brings everything together and it can also provide you with a bit of thinking time.

3. *Limiting the number of tasks*

As chair, by limiting the number of tasks you ask your meeting to accomplish, you will have a better chance of maintaining focus right through the meeting. Set a brisk pace right at the start, but if it becomes clear that you are not going to achieve all that was planned, either speed up, or postpone the less important items until another meeting (with the consent of the members, of course).

Domineering members

In the same way that the chair can dominate a meeting, so can individual members, especially if they feel that they are in a more powerful position than other people in the room, for example by knowledge or experience.

A good way of dealing with this is to use the pressure of the group to handle the situation. Thank the member for their contribution and then bring in the others. “We’ve all heard what xyz has said now I’d like to ask the rest of you for your comments”.

This must be done quickly and firmly otherwise there is a risk of the domineering member pushing and demanding a decision without further discussion. If you do this often, the person will soon get the message.

Conflict and aggression

Should you ever be in a position when you are facilitating a meeting where individuals are becoming heated, use a summary to attempt to take some of the head out of the room.

If emotions are getting out of hand you may want to take a short break. But if that does not work and the meeting deteriorates beyond recovery, you will need to seek advice from your Clerk as to whether the meeting should be adjourned.

Whatever steps you take, never:

1. Lose control
2. Abdicate your chairing role
3. Take sides in a dispute.

A poor finish

Indecisive endings leave everyone low spirited and disappointed so pay attention to the way you close the meeting. Take time to summarise the areas the meeting has covered, together with the key actions that have been agreed.

A strong end is particularly important in meetings where there has been conflict or controversy as this is your opportunity to end the meeting on a more positive and co-operative note.

Setting and using ground rules

Group decision making is more efficient and achieves better results when meeting participants have a shared understanding of expected behaviours and attitudes. This can involve the setting and maintenance of ground rules.

The idea behind this is for everyone participating to understand the way the meeting is going to be run and compliance with these rules can become a condition of people remaining in the meeting.

Always written in the positive, examples of ground rules include:

1. All views will be heard
2. Raise your hand if you would like to contribute

3. One person speaks at a time
4. Listen to others quietly and with respect
5. Stick to times
6. Stay on topic.

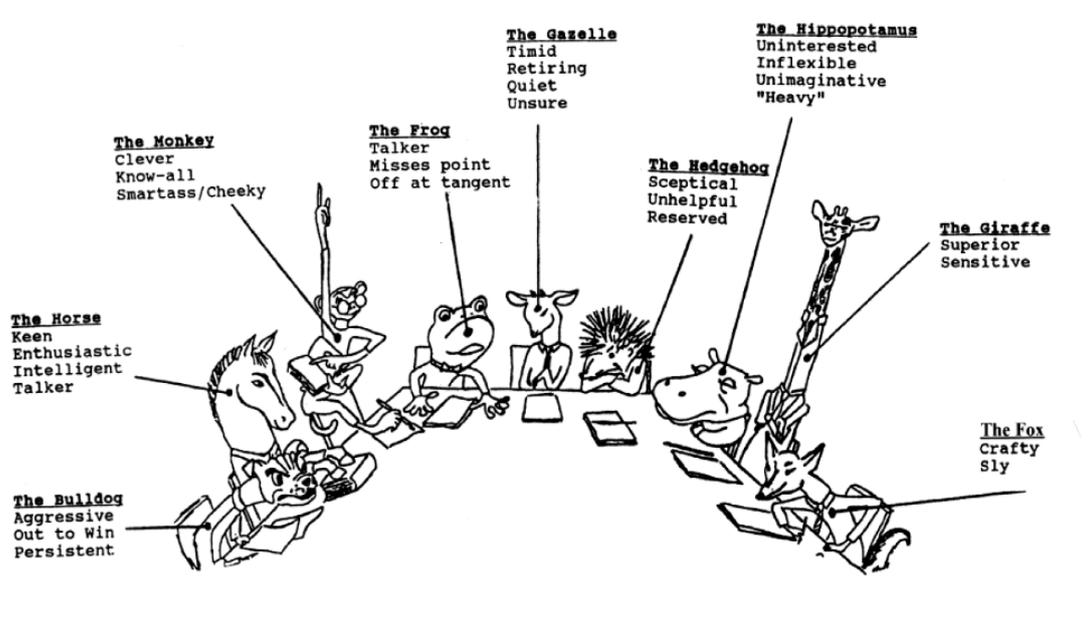
In difficult situations, ground rules are your best friend.

You can introduce these in anticipation of conflict so that participants are clear right from the start how things will be. Or if you are caught out by unexpected levels of heat or dissent, you can stop the meeting and impose your rules before the discussion continues.

Meeting dynamics

Dynamics are one of the most fascinating, and sometimes frustrating, elements of working with committees and groups. Some meetings have excellent dynamics and work well, whilst other meetings experience destructive conflicts, stalemates and competitive behaviours.

People in meetings have been likened to animals around the table and I show you a picture of this (below) on the basis that you promise you won't print it off and write people's names against the characters.



From the perspective of the chair, this also demonstrates the importance of having the skills and behaviours needed to be able to unite people with disparate values, views and opinions.

More people are tending to describe the chairing function as a "facilitator" role. Facilitation means to make something easier or smoother, so this does make sense.

Encouraging participation

To encourage participation, it is important that you create an environment where contributions are welcome, and people feel “safe” to participate.

Specific behaviours which may encourage quieter participants to come forward include:

- using the ‘round robin’ (where you go around the room one by one) to check for unasked questions or views
- asking: “Who hasn’t had an opportunity to speak....?”
- using techniques, such as pose – pause – pounce. This involves posing a question, pausing for a moment then casually using someone’s name to draw them in
- rewarding contribution by acknowledging the point that somebody has made
- using an open palm and direct eye contact when you ask a question
- choosing “open” questions: who, what, where, when and how... then being prepared to sit in silence!

Keeping the meeting on track

Sound, look and feel in control right from the start. Even if you are feeling uncomfortable or less confident, sit upright with a good head position. Demonstrate in your non-verbal confidence that you are the facilitator. Whilst you are there to listen, you are also there to keep the meeting on track

You will find it hard to control the discussion later, if you do not show good control technique right from the start.

Set a clear purpose for the meeting – your Agenda helps you to do this. This purpose gives you a neutral source of reference later if you need to refer to it as a control mechanism: “If you remember the purpose of this meeting is to....”.

Set clear ground rules and use them to control the discussion.

Use the broken record technique if you can, which means picking a statement and repeating it but changing it each time you do so: “If you remember we agreed to....” followed by “as I mentioned we have already agreed that...”.

When you use the broken record technique, make sure that your voice “drops on the last word of your sentence”. This is called an embedded command. If you lift your voice you will sound negotiable.

Should things go off at a tangent, and you are sure that what is being said is irrelevant, intervene early.

To interrupt, wait for the person to breathe or pause or breathe. Jump into their breathing

space, saying something along the lines of:

- “May I just take you back to.....”
- “You mentioned a moment ago.....”
- “(name)– you said that.....”
- “So (summarise what they said)” and then without waiting for a response immediately ask a relevant question.

If you really need to be firmer and the techniques above don't work, say “(the person's name)”. Pause to see if they stop. Then repeat their name – this time a bit more assertively. Repeat this until you get their attention.

Use your hand. Use a soft hand and lift it up, palm gently sloped towards the person that you are wishing to control. Combine it with slightly raised eyebrows and your head on one side then gently lower your palm down as you interrupt with “may I.....” or another interruption technique.

Control techniques

Many of us have struggled to keep order during meetings, and it is easy for a discussion to get out of hand very quickly.

Ground-rules (mentioned earlier this booklet) can be your best friend because they provide a set of joint principles which become a condition of being part of the meeting.

In addition it is important that you look like you are in control – even if you don't feel it. Think of yourself as cabin crew when a plane hits turbulence. Passengers will study your face to see how serious things are... so make sure you manage your facial expression.

In control terms always start with your lightest touch. In a physical meeting this is silence combined with some eye contact focussed on the perpetrator. The person will soon realise everyone has stopped talking and this is often enough to bring the meeting under control.

For over-talkative participants who are going around in circles or wandering off-brief, you will need to interrupt. To do this, talk into their breathing space with “so (followed by the briefest of summaries)” followed by “and”. Then immediately take control back and place your next question elsewhere in the room.

Other tips

- Avoid spending too much time on one person so spin your attention around the room. If you don't pay attention to everyone, people start to lose focus.
- Use phrases such as: “we've heard from x, y and z..... who haven't we heard from who would like to contribute?”
- You can also use time to manage time – try the old hand on the watch routine! Say “I'm

conscious that we are starting to run out of time a bit (touch your watch); I suggest we move on to our next item.....”.

- In physical meetings when you have a choice of seating, keep tricky people close to you. It can be natural for an opposer to sit opposite. By keeping your harder-to-manage participants closer you can manage their interactions better.
- To stop or control a persistent interrupter, use a softly opened hand with palm shown towards the person that you need to manage. Make sure that your hand is ‘soft’ and that you smile as you do this.

Conflict within meetings

Because meetings depend on interaction between people with different values, perspectives and communication styles, it is almost inevitable that conflict will occur from time to time.

It can be argued that some conflict is healthy because:

- strong views imply that people care about a topic
- a clash of views can lead to compromise and better-rounded outcomes
- repressed emotions can leak subliminally into passive aggressive behaviours.

Some meeting participants may be very uncomfortable with loud interactions and as Chair, it is your responsibility to make sure that any differences in views are managed in a healthy and focused way.

Tips for managing conflict

- Be aware of topics on the agenda which may be controversial and set ground-rules before the discussion starts. You can then use these rules to impose order.
- Should a topic become unexpectedly heated, stop the discussion and impose ground-rules before continuing with the meeting.
- Nip poor behaviour in the bud without appearing to ‘side’ against an individual.
- Use humour (please take care with this one!) to disarm.
- Avoid being drawn into a 1:1 discussion; focus on the whole meeting.
- Impose structure: people should address their comments to you. You then summarise neutrally to take the heat out of the contribution.
- Take a break. Let everyone calm down a bit.
- Refuse to continue until there is order.
- Stop the meeting.

Decisions and actions

A key reason for holding a meeting is to make decisions and create actions.

Once agreed, the way these are phrased are important to the measurement of outcome, so it is important to make sure that these are written using a specific and measurable format.

High quality action points, in common with objectives, have very specific features:

Specific: clearly stating what must be achieved – and sometimes how.

Measurable: if this is achieved, how will you know?

Achievable: realistic but challenging.

Relevant: to make sure that the proposed action sits within the scope of the meeting's terms of reference.

Timed: with specified review points and an end date if applicable. Some actions may be continuous.

Tips for writing effective action/decision points

Start with a verb, which will give the action a sense of momentum and direction.

Useful verbs include:

- Develop
- Copy
- Liaise
- Initiate
- Delegate
- Implement
- Complete
- Change
- Communicate
- Write
- File
- Present
- Publish
- Process
- Co-ordinate
- Reply
- Produce
- Answer
- Respond
- Type
- Organise
- Circulate

Once you have developed your action statement, make it measurable.

The success of a task can usually be measured in one or more of four ways:

1. Time
2. Cost
3. Quality
4. Quantity

Most outcomes should have at least three of these four elements: quality, quantity and time.

The cost element may not be used in all situations, however if there is a minimum and maximum budget for an objective this should be included. Be specific about whether this cost includes or excludes VAT as this could potentially give a 20% deviation.

The four measures can be interpreted as follows:

Quality	How well To what standard
Quantity	How much How little All? Every? Each?
Time	How quickly How soon How much time When started When ended
Cost	Minimum spend Maximum spend Cost per item Cost per activity

Working with your clerk

It is important that you and your clerk work together in partnership. How you do this will depend on the type and nature of the meeting.

The clerk may have years of experience in local government, so make sure you take full advantage of their wisdom and advice.

Experienced democratic services officers will often carry out a good chunk of minuting before the meeting because many of the reports and formal motions are known in advance.

Some general tips which apply to all meetings, rather than being particularly directed to formal committee meetings include:

When working with a new clerk or minute-taker:

- meet beforehand to clarify the purpose of the meeting
- discuss the scope of your roles so that you do not bump into each other
- explain any jargon and abbreviations they will come across
- agree their 'right to interrupt'
- in physical meetings, agree that you will sit together (for tactical use of the elbow)

Working together:

- meet with your clerk beforehand, going through the agenda, looking at any potential issues and discussing ideas on how the meeting will run
- during the meeting, ask participants who are speaking quietly to project their voice better so that the minute taker can hear (this may be less important if a meeting is being recorded)
- for longer meetings, ensure that there are breaks so that all of you, including your clerk, can take a breather
- summarise complex discussions so that the clerk can check that they have recorded the meeting's key points
- after the meeting check with the clerk that they have everything that is needed.

Closing the meeting

In the same way you paid attention at the start of the meeting, you should give equal attention to the way you close the meeting. This means allowing time on the agenda to do this properly before people start to log out of the meeting.

Virtual meetings are no different to any other type of meeting: they still need a beginning, a middle and an end.

How you end depends on the type and formality of the meeting, but may include the following.

1. A summary of the decisions taken and action points to be followed up
2. Confirmation of who is going to do what – and when
3. Agreeing or confirming the date of the next meeting
4. Agreeing any special items which will be placed on the agenda for the next meeting
5. A reminder about when the minutes will be circulated
6. The important “thank you” for attending.

Because on-line meetings are relatively new, some organisations are encouraging some informal feedback at the close of the meeting, although this may not always be appropriate for formal meetings.

In the virtual environment, the Chair (sometimes the clerk, by agreement) should be the last person to leave the “room”, ensuring that all members have logged out.

Chairing virtual and hybrid meetings

An introduction to virtual meetings

Whilst we are all familiar with the traditional round table discussion, “virtual meetings” – those held on-line – are becoming more common-place as we start to see the benefits of being able to hold face-to-face conversations with people who are remote.

During 2020, in response to the Coronavirus Pandemic, the Government introduced a temporary piece of legislation, the Coronavirus Act, which gave councils powers to change their democratic processes.

Part of this included councils changing from physical to online meetings which means that many of us had to learn new ways of working.

Although now that lockdown has eased and councils are starting to revert to face-to-face meetings to conduct official business, it is likely that many of us will have adapted to the virtual environment and will continue to make use of technology for some of our councillor activities.

There are significant benefits of meeting online:

- reduction in travel time, expenses and environmental impact
- convenience
- information can be shared in real-time
- on-line meetings can be sharper, more focussed – and often shorter.

However, virtual meetings do have their challenges:

- they exclude people who do not have access to the internet or who are not technologically savvy
- there is a temptation for people to multi-task during meetings which means reduced attention
- it can be difficult to concentrate on a screen for long periods of time
- communication cues are harder to read
- internet lag means people end up talking over each other
- virtual meetings rely totally on technology – which can fail.

Despite these potential drawbacks, virtual meetings can work well. They demand a slightly different skills-set than working face-to-face which is why there is a separate section in this booklet which is devoted purely to chairing online.

Planning to chair a virtual meeting

Although an online meeting requires a similar preparation to a face-to-face event there are some additional elements of preparation required.

These involve:

- choosing and using meeting software
- making sure that you have the right equipment
- managing your environment.

Choosing and using meeting software

There are a number of conferencing products including Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, Skype for Business and Cisco Webex.

For official Council business you will be tied to a professional piece of software, for example Teams or Zoom, but for other meetings you may have more choice over which platform you use.

In choosing, consider the following points.

1. Your attendees and the software they will have access to. Community meetings should make use of easy-to-use freeware, such as Zoom.
2. The functions you will need eg. the ability to present slides/video; being able to mute other peoples' microphones or setting up sub-groups for discussions.
3. The length of meeting: some free packages cut out after 40 minutes.
4. Cost: many of the software packages come with fee-paying licences with a 12-month minimum subscription which for a one-off meeting will not be value for money.
5. Security: for sensitive and confidential meetings you will need to select a provider whose product has encrypted security.

Learning the Software

Once you have loaded the software you will need to become familiar with its workings. This means having a good play around with the program, learning all the functions you will need to use when you go 'live'.

Depending upon the type of event you are hosting, you may need to know how to:

- create a 'waiting room' so that attendees cannot enter the meeting before the host
- set up registration so that you have a record of attendees
- turn on-line recording on or off

- share your screen
- place people into groups for sub-discussions and then move them back into the main meeting
- use a whiteboard (flipchart)
- mute meeting members (one or all)
- mute yourself
- remove someone from the meeting and block them from re-joining.

Equipment

This part of the booklet should not generate a shopping list request to your council's IT team but does outline some sensible approaches to using equipment for on-line meetings.

PC versus tablet/mobile telephone

Whilst some people use their smartphone for quick facetime catchups, longer meetings work better from a PC or tablet. Telephone screens are often too small to be useful, and tablet software is often a cut-down version of the full programme which means you won't benefit from all of its functions.

Webcam

Most tablets and many modern laptops have a built-in webcam, but an older desk-top monitor may not have one, which means you will need a USB webcam. Expect to pay between £40 and £50 for a 1080P full-hd version. It is worth investing in a decent camera because lower quality versions often have poor light gathering properties.

Headset

If your computer has a built-in microphone and speaker, you will not need to buy a separate headset, although it is recommended that you use one because they reduce distracting background noises in the speaker's own environment. They also improve sound quality: it is easy to hear the difference in the quality of someone's voice. People wearing headsets sound clearer and much less echoey.

They are also an essential piece of equipment if you are participating in a confidential discussion, which must not be overheard by others, although of course other people will be able to hear your side of the conversation.

Headsets come in a variety of types and styles but remember that you need to have a set with a built-in microphone too. Your mobile telephone may have arrived with some: check the box in the loft!

For people wearing hearing aids, there are some specialist headsets on the market, but unfortunately they are often a bit more expensive.

Some of the mono over-the-ear headsets, like the one in the picture below, are adjustable so the earpiece can cover the left or the right ear by twisting the microphone 180°. Other versions have fixed microphones.

As you will have a 'dominant' ear (the one you hold your telephone to), if you decide to buy a mono headset, choose the one which has the earpiece on the best side for you. If you are not sure, buy one which is adaptable.

Boom microphones work well because you can adjust the distance between your mouth and the mic; something which can only be achieved on a computer by leaning towards and away from its in-built microphone.

The fixed mic keeps your voice volume steady. It eliminates the natural tendency to lean forward towards a computer speaker.

This improves posture which helps breathing, which in turn influences voice projection.

Microphones convert moving air patterns into electrical patterns and the burst of air from words with P, B and T place more force on the microphone than other air vibrations. The sound of the air hitting the microphone is known as a "plosive". These are unpleasant to listen to.

Modern boom mikes tend to be less sensitive to plosives because of their design, with many being constructed with a foam ending which helps disperse bursts of air.

Whatever combination of video camera, microphone and speakers you have, it is important to have a practise before you go live. It is recommended that you do this a few days before the meeting so if there is an issue you will have time to trouble-shoot it.

For advice and guidance on setting up microphones and cameras on Windows 10 computers:

<https://www.drivereasy.com/knowledge/test-microphone-windows-10-step-by-step/>

<https://support.microsoft.com/en-gb/help/4028647/windows-open-the-camera-in-windows-10>

For Apple, see:

<https://support.apple.com/en-gb/guide/mac-help/mchlp2980/mac>

<https://www.onlinemictest.com/microphone-settings/mac-os-x/>

Recipe book stand

If you have other papers or a tablet to refer to during a meeting, you will find it useful to use a recipe book stand next to your screen.

This avoids having to look up and down at your paperwork and means that you can slide your eyes sideways from your screen to your notes and back again. Thoroughly recommended!

Environment

To make sure you project a professional image, think carefully about where you choose to sit. Some of us may not have a huge amount of choice because of the need to be close to the broadband router or to maximise the wifi/mobile telephone signal.

As cluttered backgrounds can be a distraction, either have a tidy-up or choose an area of your home which has a plain wall that you can use as a backdrop.

Remember to remove any 'sensitive' books, photographs and materials which you would prefer people not to see. Many councillors are mindful that the public are effectively peering into their personal world, so it is common to hear that people choosing to remove family photographs before dialling in to a meeting.

Tuck anything confidential away out of sight.

Most of the software platforms have a "blurred background" setting which keeps the speaker sharp, whilst making their backdrop fuzzy.

Your council may have provided you with a digital backdrop. Just be aware that any background overlay eats into your broadband data, so if you struggle for bandwidth, this may be an issue.

There may also be in-house rules about backgrounds in terms of not showing logos or anything which may be deemed "promotional".

When choosing your seating spot, avoid sitting directly in front of a window as viewers will have to squint to see you and in bright sunlight you will turn into a silhouette. Seeing other people walking past the window can also be distracting to other people in the meeting.

In addition:

- let other people in your household know you are holding an on-line meeting to avoid any accidental video bombing
- place animals in another room so that your pet tarantula does not become an unexpected star
- unplug your house telephone or switch it to mute
- place your mobile telephone onto silent and turn off the vibrate function: either move it away from your desk, or turn its cellular signal off to minimise feedback between its radio signal and your computer
- if bandwidth is an issue, switch off any unused wifi/internet appliances and ask others in the household to avoid streaming or playing data hungry games whilst you are online
- if your meeting is going to run for several hours, make sure you have a comfort break before you start
- have a glass of water nearby to sip; some meetings can run for a fair length of time!

Dress and personal appearance

Dress is always a tricky topic because we all have our own style and ideas of what works and what doesn't - and it shouldn't be anyone's business what you choose to wear.

The best approach is to say: "dress appropriately" and apply the same principles as you would to face-to-face meetings.

In virtual meetings, as you will usually only be seen from your waist up, what you wear on your lower half may seem less important, although you may feel more professional if you are in full attire rather than pairing a formal jacket with your best thong.

Presenting on-screen can influence some of the rules of dress.

- Black and very dark coloured clothing can make someone appear indistinct, particularly if they are in a poorly lit room. It can drain the colour from someone's skin and accentuate any shadows under their eyes.
- White clothing can be quite sharp and in bright light may create a ghostly haze.
- Narrow stripes project poorly on-screen. They can make strange and distracting shapes, known as a moire pattern. Plain is usually best.
- Jangly jewellery can be noisy and irritating.
- Professional television presenters will often wear plain, un-patterned "jewel colours".

Virtual meetings - working with the meeting clerk

In a physical meeting, your clerk would normally sit next to you, so you could confer. On-line this is obviously impossible, although you still need to remain a team.

Virtual minuting is quite an art although for meetings that are being recorded, if the note taker needs to check a contribution, they will have the benefit of being able to review the video of the discussion.

Before the meeting:

- check that you both have the same paperwork
- agree what pre-minuting can be carried out in advance
- ask the clerk if there are any topics on the agenda which may require clarification before the meeting including any technical terms or abbreviations that will be used
- explain how you plan to chair the meeting
- give the clerk your “permission to interrupt” during the meeting if they are having difficulty hearing
- if this is a Part II or Part B discussion, what are the rules about participants being alone for the discussion, eg. if there is someone else in the room or in the background, can the meeting still continue?

During the meeting:

- roll call participants at the start, so that the clerk has a full attendance list
- remind members of the meeting that the clerk will be taking notes and ask people to speak clearly
- check in with the clerk between complex agenda items to ensure they were able to minute the main points
- if a participant’s sound quality is poor or breaks up during their contribution, ask them to repeat their contribution for the meeting and for your clerk’s benefit
- at the close of the meeting check again with the clerk
- thank the clerk publicly for minuting.

After the meeting ends:

- ask the clerk to stay in the virtual room until other members have left and double-check that they captured all the key points
- be available post-meeting to clarify any areas of uncertainty.

Opening a virtual meeting

When you chair a face-to-face meeting, you will open the meeting by covering a number of required elements including declarations of interest, minutes of the last meeting and matters arising.

Virtual meetings still require a similar introduction, and your committee clerk will advise you on the compulsory elements you must include when you open the meeting.

In addition to these requirements, because this is an on-line meeting, you will also need to add some additional key points to your introduction so that a clear process is in place. Laying a proper groundwork for the meeting will help to minimise potential problems later on.

The trick is to gain a balance between setting the scene for how you will work without being too lengthy as participants will become impatient if the introduction goes on for too long. You will need to tailor this introductory part to the meeting. In general terms you should consider the following points.

Cameras and microphones

- Must cameras be on or off?
- Microphones – can these be left on – or should they only be turned on when the participant is speaking?

Chat and WhatsApp

Is the “chat” function enabled. If so, how must it be used? Councils have reported “parallel” meetings running in the chat box, which creates an issue because members of the public cannot see the comments that are being made.

Likewise, if there is a WhatsApp group running during the meeting, you need to be very clear about its purpose and how it must/must not be used.

External videoing and recording

Is the meeting being videoed? If so, you need to let participants know as by staying in the meeting they are giving implicit permission to be recorded. Can anyone else video or record the meeting? Usually the answer will be NO.

Participation ground-rules

- Do participants address their comments through the Chair, or can they speak to other Members directly?
- How will people gain your attention? By raising their hand on-camera, clicking the “raised hand” icon, by writing into the text box – or a mix of some or all of these?
- What is your process if a number of people raise their hand at the same time?
- What is the maximum “talk time” per person?

- If a participant loses their signal and effectively leaves the meeting, what's the rule/protocol around re-entering the meeting?

Voting

There are a variety of approaches being taken to voting, including:

- members raising their hands on-screen
- polling each meeting member individually for their vote by going around the virtual room, one-by-one
- survey-monkey type polls
- using the text box to say yay or nay
- or use of the “raised hand” virtual symbol.

Your council will have decided about the on-line voting process so make sure you know how this is going to work.

Introductions

At certain meetings you might decide to invite participants to introduce themselves. This can be a bit of a minefield to manage as some people do like to talk!

If you decide that introductions are needed, invite people to do this by being very directive: “please introduce yourself by just saying your name and the Ward and Council you represent”.

At meetings where everyone knows each other you should allow just a couple of minutes before you officially open the meeting for participants to say an informal “hello” to each other. Your meeting invitation could ask everyone to be in the virtual room a few minutes before the start time so that this does not impact on your meeting agenda and schedule.

The minute taker/clerk

It is good practice to remind participants that the meeting clerk is also in the meeting and to ask people to speak clearly so that the minute taker can be heard.

You may also choose to say that the Officer has permission to interrupt if they cannot hear and require clarification.

Tips for managing virtual meetings

1. When you refer to a document, be specific about the page or paragraph number and if this is further on, allow a moment for participants to find the passage you are referencing.
2. Call a person to speak by using their name.
3. When inviting members of the public to speak, let them know how much time they have, and remind them when they are down to their last 30 seconds.
4. You can use the master microphone control to switch someone's microphone off remotely, although to avoid abuse of this power you would only resort to this:
 - when, despite your request, someone hasn't muted their own microphone and there is too much background noise
 - as a final resort if someone fails to comply with your verbal reminder of their time limit
 - if someone continues with unacceptable behaviour despite a warning.
5. You can still tackle challenging discussions in a virtual meeting. Just make sure that you set the scene properly for the discussion and have a proper structure in place for the discussion
6. Control the meeting by using the agenda. Keep to the item under discussion and work your way through the agenda, item by item. Change its order only when essential and then only with the consent of the members.
7. Introduce each item in turn. Give it shape by explaining its purpose and why it is on the agenda. State facts, not opinions. Be concise and avoid making long speeches.
8. Call upon members one by one to speak. If a number of people indicate their wish to speak, place them in order so that they know when their turn is.
9. Avoid always calling on the same speakers. Share your attention around the meeting.
10. Clarify issues if they become obscure.
11. At the end of each agenda item summarise key points together with any decision or action that has been agreed.
12. Keep the meeting moving and on course in a firm but polite manner.
13. Although this would not work with larger numbers of participants, at smaller meetings you can go around the room (a "round robin") to check that all views have been heard.

Communication skills – virtual meetings

Voice and tone

- Use your natural voice, so that you sound like you.
- Microphones “flatten” the voice so make sure that you use your full tonal range.
- Speak slower than you would in conversation, to allow for any lag.
- To sound confident, project your voice from your chest.
- Take care with lifting your voice at the end of a sentence (unless you are asking a question) as it can weaken your stance.
- If you ask a question, lift your voice up at the end of your sentence to signal that you are seeking a response.
- After asking a question, allow a good period for people to respond. This silence can feel uncomfortable, but it is needed to overcome the time lag associated with on-line communication.
- Drop your voice at the end of a sentence when you want to end a discussion or move on to another point. This can work well at the close of a summary because it makes it sound final.

Non-verbal behaviour

- Sit upright
- Keep your head level to the camera so that you maintain good eye contact
- Avoid looking down at papers too much
- Talk to the camera
- Manage your facial expression: remember people are only seeing your top half so what you do with your face becomes more profound and noticeable
- When you listen actively this shows in your body language through nodding or placing your head on one side
- Slow your non-verbal behaviour: concentrate on measured gestures rather than fast movements
- Try to avoid touching your face with your hands
- If you need to scratch your head, do it slowly
- If you need to scratch anywhere else, avoid doing this on camera.

Facilitation skills

You can still use many of the techniques you use when chairing face-to-face meetings

To encourage participation:

- create an environment where there is no such thing as a silly question or silly comment and where all contributions are welcomed and treated with respect
- in smaller meetings, using the “round robin” to check for unasked questions or views
- use techniques like “who hasn’t had an opportunity to speak?”
- listen openly and neutrally
- notice when two people speak at the same time and smiling at the camera and raising your hand on screen so that the person who didn’t continue talking sees that you have noticed and that you will come to them next (just remember to do so)
- build on ideas and where you can, linking common elements of different views together.

To maintaining leadership:

- look like you are in control: demonstrating gravitas through your facial expression, tonality and body language
- avoid becoming hooked into a discussion with one person: spin your attention around the meeting members
- use phrases like: “we’ve heard from x, y and z..... who haven’t we heard from who would like to contribute.....?”
- the agenda is your best friend: if conversations wander off-piste, summarise and bring the topic back to the item you are supposed to be discussing
- use time to manage time – try the old hand on the watch routine!

Being a good virtual meeting participant

Although our emphasis has been on the role of the Chair, a good meeting needs good membership. Here are some do's of being a good virtual meeting participant.

- Dial into the meeting in advance so that any technology issues can be sorted in good time
- Be courteous: not being in the same room doesn't give licence for poor behaviour
- If you want to say something, follow the protocol set out at the start of the meeting
- Keep your contributions short and to the point and only speak if you have something new to add to the discussion
- Keep your own body movements to the minimum to avoid visually distracting others
- Talk clearly and slow down slightly to allow for internet lag
- If you need to cough, sneeze, burp (or anything else) use your mute button
- Mute if you are not speaking to reduce sound pollution
- Silence your mobile telephone
- In larger meetings, introduce yourself before you speak
- Concentrate on the meeting and avoid multi-tasking
- Take care if you share your screen: check there isn't anything open which you should not show to others, for example confidential emails.

In summary....

Virtual meetings can work well in their own right; they are not necessarily a poor substitute for face-to-face discussions, and they can have benefits over same-room committees.

As we become more accustomed to running and participating on-line, it will start to feel more natural. Some of us may think we will never acclimatise to the virtual environment but give it time and you will be surprised how you will adapt. The secrets with virtual meetings, as with any other type of meeting, are to:

- plan properly
- be clear about your meeting purpose
- ensure the right people are there and brief everyone beforehand with a good agenda and clear set of papers
- open the meeting and explain how the process will work
- be mindful of technology and how it impacts on the way we communicate
- facilitate as you would a face-to-face meeting, ensuring that quieter members have an opportunity to participate
- make balanced decisions based on the information and evidence presented
- close the meeting with clear next steps
- learn what works – and what does not work – from the meetings you Chair as well as those you attend
- be a considerate participant.

Hybrid meetings

As lockdown has eased, some councils have gravitated towards “hybrid” meetings, with some physical participants and others dialling in. This adds another dimension to the chairing role as the meeting leader must balance contributions between physical and virtual participants.

Technology and equipment

Before the meeting, consider the layout of the room and how you will make use of the IT equipment you have available to you. The school’s IT team may be able to provide advice and guidance on how this could work.

In an ideal world, you would have virtual board members displayed on a screen which is placed at the front of the room. If this is not possible, another option would be for those present in the meeting room to use a laptop or tablet so that they can see their virtual colleagues. It is important that there is some connectivity between the two elements of the meeting.

Opening the meeting and setting the scene

We spoke earlier about the importance of opening meetings, especially laying out your ground-rules. When you are chairing a hybrid meeting, you will need to add to your introduction, as it is important to explain how you intend to integrate virtual and physical contributions. It is important you pay attention to this because everyone needs to be clear about how the process will work.

Managing the meeting

Because you will be alternating between physical and virtual contributions, you will need to signpost this to the meeting. This means explaining what you are about to do, before you do it, for example:

- “I’m going to invite Councillor Pucknell, who is in the room with me to speak”
- “I’ve noticed that several board members who have joined us online have their hands raised. I am going to go to Councillor Shah first, Councillor Edwards second and then come back to Councillor Ali, who is with me here in the meeting room”.

You will need to check both sets of participants before decisions are made to ensure that everyone who wants to have their say has had an opportunity. Once again, you need to make your process clear so that everyone in the meeting understands how this will work. Try to balance contributions, ie, avoid favouring the contributions of physical participants over those who are virtual (and vice versa). This means sharing your attention fairly between both groups and using every opportunity possible to unite groups so that they do not feel divided.

You should manage your eye contact so that everyone feels included. In the meeting room this means “light-housing” your eyes around the room so that you contact everyone. For your virtual colleagues this means looking directly at the camera, so that it feels like personalised eye contact.

Hybrid meetings can work very well, although they do need a bit more thought and process.

Finally...

This booklet has provided you with some tips and techniques around the skills of chairing physical, virtual and hybrid meetings.

The chair's role is incredibly important: it doesn't matter what type of meeting it is, your role is to facilitate, and to ensure high quality outcomes.

It is important to continually evolve and develop your skills, so watch other chairs in action to see what you can learn from others. It is a good idea to review your recordings (I know, I know!), so that you can draw your own conclusions about what you do well versus what needs improving.

Enjoy your role. It's a real privilege to bring a group of disparate people, with different ideologies, agendas and motivations together into one team.

Author: **Miranda Smythe**

This booklet has been written to provide advice and guidance for Chairs and Vice Chairs whose role centres around chairing meetings.

Whether these meetings are physical, virtual or “hybrid”, being effective in the chairing role demands a high-level of skills. This publication will provide advice and guidance on how to be the best chair you can.

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