Effective chairing will ensure that a meeting achieves its aims and objectives. Chairs should facilitate, encourage, focus, listen and clarify

1. What Makes a Good Chair?

- An understanding of the issues and topics being discussed and keenly listening to the discussions
- Being able to prevent discussions wandering, prevent those without anything new to add repeating the same point, being able to move on when a point is discussed as far as possible
- Ensuring that all members have an equal opportunity to express their point of view
- Showing respect for the views and actions of others
- Encouraging all members to take equal responsibility for the meeting proceeding smoothly
- Not putting their own views across to the detriment of others
- Not speaking for too long
- Being impartial
- Being able to summarise the key points made in discussions
- Keep to time

2. Before the Meeting

Chairs should compile the agenda in good time and agree and order the agenda. Any member can request an item to be put on the agenda and normally the Secretariat will set deadlines for the receipt of an item and any accompanying papers. Getting the structure of the agenda right is crucial. Important business should have sufficient time for proper debate.

3. At the Meeting

Chairs need to lead the meeting so that all those involved can make useful contributions and unhelpful digressions and arguments are discouraged. Chairs should present information and summaries clearly and at the most effective times. They need to ensure that the meeting’s objectives are achieved in the time available and that decisions are communicated to all those who need to know. Discussion time should be allocated to each agenda item in a way which is consistent with their importance and complexity.

Chairs should, through their own behaviour and body language, model good meeting behaviour and accept nothing less from colleagues. They should be careful not to generate antagonism. A healthy professional discussion where diversity of ideas and approaches are constructively used to create the best solution and not as personal attacks is the ideal. If colleagues are going to give of their best they need to know that all contributions are valued, that they will get credit for their ideas and that the committee is strengthened by their collective success rather than scoring points off one another. It is the Chair who sets the tone and manages the process.

Meetings should be run in ways that are as inclusive as possible. You should always be aware that not all people are familiar or comfortable with formal meeting procedure and that it can alienate and intimidate people, creating barriers to participation. People who do not know or understand what is going on around them are less likely to take the risk of speaking up. Chairs must ensure that there is real democracy and that everyone is involved and encouraged to take part.

Other points to successful and effective chairing:
• Start the meeting on time. This respects those who turned up on time and reminds late-comers that the scheduling is serious. Start late to accommodate late-comers and they will assume it is ok to come late.

• Introduce yourself and welcome all, especially new members and thank them for their time. If it is the first meeting of the committee it is good practice for all members to introduce themselves.

• At the start of the meeting, review the overall agenda briefly and involve members in committing to the agenda. This will give participants a chance to understand all proposed major items and to indicate any adjustments you may need to make to the agenda for new problems or priorities.

• Review what has previously been done, congratulating members when things have been accomplished.

• At the start of each major agenda item, there should be a short introduction to develop a common understanding and to encourage participation. Clarify at the outset the type of action needed, the outcome expected (decision, information point, action assigned to someone).

• Remind members what preparation was expected of them and if colleagues were expected to read papers before the meeting don't read them out. The next time you ask them to read beforehand they will assume it is not worth the effort.

• Keep the meeting focussed, on time and encourage equal participation and contribution from members. Summarise key points afterwards if lengthy. If discussions are side-tracked, take appropriate action to get back on track.

• Ensure that the language used is appropriate, clarify any jargon, initials or acronyms – you should not assume that everyone has equal knowledge or understanding.

• Ensure that all the key points are agreed and minuted and actions assigned to individuals where appropriate with the proposed time-frame and feedback required.

• Ensure the minute taker is clear on the agreed recommendation and actions proposed.

• Ensure unresolved items or non agenda items raised during the meeting are parked for later attention and it is agreed how they will be followed-up, e.g. agenda item for next meeting, sub-group to address outside of meeting etc.

4. Closing the Meeting

• Wherever possible, end the meeting on a positive encouraging note.

• Clarify that minutes and actions will be reported back to members within the normal timescale.

• End the meeting on time. This shows respect for the participants and will encourage people to commit to staying to the end.

5. After the Meeting:

• Confirm with the Secretariat that they have a record of all key discussions, outcomes and actions.

• Check carefully the draft minutes sent to you by the Clerk/Scretariat/Minute Taker, make any necessary amendments and return promptly.
• Arrange any follow-up discussions
• Ensure minutes are sent out in a timely manner

6. Finally, a few dos and don’ts

Do
• introduce yourself, maybe new members or others observing don’t know who you are
• make everyone feel comfortable
• enjoy yourself

Don’t
• talk too much
• assume everyone has the same knowledge or knows what you are talking about
• take sides
• become a participant of the discussion unless you have something specific to add. If necessary ask someone else to chair while you speak to an item
• manipulate the meeting towards your own agenda
• criticise the values and ideas of others
• force your own ideas on the meeting. If necessary have someone else chair the meeting so you can take part
• make decisions for the members without asking them for agreement