

How to: run better meetings



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Be honest, how many marks out of 10 would you give your local group meetings? For interest, new members, action, the social side? Chances are, every group reading this pull-out could improve their meetings. Getting started is not hard, says Paul de Zylva, London Campaigns Coordinator. Try some of the ideas in the pull-out and don't look back.

Time well spent



Every local group wants more active members. This hard-to-find species has a habit of appearing out of the blue and catching local groups unprepared. Far too many who do put in an appearance then vote with their feet and are never seen again.

It is easy to fall into bad meeting habits. It is also easy to start changing things for the better. To new members your meeting should demonstrate you are worth sticking with. A meeting is perhaps the most important thing about your group. Taking action to make your meetings work, for everyone, sends signals that your group is thinking ahead, wants to succeed in its campaigns, and is keen to attract and keep new blood.

No magic wand



There is no magic wand for making meetings work. It doesn't take much to know when things work well and when things are badly wrong. Groups may be reluctant even to acknowledge there is a problem.

Change can only happen with the consent of the group or at least its key people. Unfortunately these can be the very people whose approach or behaviour creates the problem! (by taking on too many roles for example). Some ideas about change can be introduced straight away. Others may have to be phased in over time in ways that everyone supports and that do not leave anyone feeling undermined.

“ Oh, you're new are you...? ”

People attend FOE local group meetings because it is the most obvious way of finding out about the group. People stick their heads round the door for many reasons. Some may be looking for social contact as much as wanting to be active. They want to see that the group is dynamic and that there are members they can relate to. They don't want to be forced down routes before they know what routes exist. They will find their own level when they are ready – some quicker than others. You cannot always tell what level they are at. The right format – ensuring new people feel able to

take part, and taking time to engage with (not interrogate) newcomers – will help.

“ To new members your meeting should demonstrate that you are worth sticking with. Your regular meeting is perhaps the most important thing about your group. ”

I still recall one visit to a local group where if I had not spoken to the new person who, having felt brave at first was now feeling like a fish out of water, none of the existing members would have made the effort. Talking to people is no guarantee they'll come back

and get active. But it's worth a try. Don't patronise, pander or rush people. Too often I hear people saying: “Oh you're new are you? Good we need a new transport campaigner – will you do that?”

Having things for people to do is good but don't 'promote' them before they have even joined. Some groups have a person assigned to helping new members when they first arrive. But everyone in the group has a responsibility to make people feel at their ease, just as making the meeting work is down to everyone.

Pull-out section

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Getting ideas into the open

Trying out improvements to your meetings is time well spent. Why not give these ideas a go at your next meeting. Record people's ideas on a large piece of paper so everyone can see and contribute.

Everyone involved needs to:

- 1** think constructively – not apportion blame
- 2** respect other people's views and avoid questioning what people say
- 3** be committed to making changes
- 4** realise that this is just for starters and that not everything can be done in one go

Take five minutes to brainstorm

ASK 'What are our meetings for?'

ASK 'What's good about our meetings?'

ASK 'What's not so good about our meetings?'

Look at the list of 'not so goods' and identify any key ideas for improvement. Consider what immediate changes can be made, what can be introduced over time and what would work for different types of members (new, experienced, those who want a social element).

If just a few of you do this to get ideas flowing, take your results and repeat the exercise with the main group OR if you do it with the main group first of all, record the results and ask for people's reactions and ideas in your newsletter and at the next meeting.

New kid on the block

This is a good way of getting ideas flowing. You put yourselves in the shoes of someone who has decided that today's the day to see what your group is all about. Consider:

- ???** What will they be expecting to happen at the meeting?
- ???** What do you want them to think/feel/see when they first walk in?
- ???** What do you need them to go home thinking and feeling?
- ???** If the expectations are realistic how can you start meeting them?

Another way of doing this is to recall your first visit to a FOE local group. What was it like? Interesting? Challenging? Overwhelming? Fun? Cold? Did everyone sit around or did people actually do something? Did anyone speak to you other than to ask what you are interested in or try to get you to be the Coordinator?!

Bad habits

- * Inaccessible venue
- * No sign posting outside the venue
- * Generally unwelcoming atmosphere
- * No time for a break, refreshments or social element during or after the meeting
- * No clear aims and objectives
- * Nobody facilitating or chairing for the meeting
- * Late arrivals



Good habits

- * Unforced, welcoming and friendly atmosphere
- * Clear agenda for all to see
- * Introductions – not just names
- * Recap on recent events/last meeting



Pull-out section

Something for everyone

Developing a standard yet flexible format for meetings will allow you to do everything you want and need to do in your time together and still have time for a post-meeting social or drink. Some groups publicise their standard agenda in their newsletters so everyone knows the timings and format and grows used to it.

The following sample format can be used by groups large and small. Even small groups should adopt a format that offers something for everyone. You never know when that elusive new member will walk through the door.

7.30 pm Display outline agenda

7.45 pm **Introductions:** something like asking people to sign in on a large sheet (marker pen and large sheet needed) and say one thing about what they do in the group or what they are interested in – why they came and what they want from the meeting. This may not be necessary if no one new turns up – but it is worth keeping free just in case (five minutes maximum).

7.50 pm **Agree draft agenda** (displayed on a large sheet for everyone to see) Ask people if they are happy with the order of business and if any key or urgent issues are missing. Ask for Any Other Business items and add to end. Some items might need explanation (five minutes maximum).

7.55 pm **Best thing/worst thing:** what has happened since we last met? The idea is to bring up key business in ways that allow the group to review what worked and what could have worked better and to make sure nothing gets overlooked. Take bullet point notes to include in your next newsletter (15 minutes maximum).

8.10 pm **Split into work groups:** to work on key campaign areas (such as Waste or Transport) or to forward-plan or deal with admin issues. Groups can work up an idea for others to take forward after the meeting (such as a key letter to be written) or come up with ideas for the whole group to approve. Issues arising or actions needed can be written up on a large sheet for display during the tea break (20 minutes).

8.30 pm **Break/free time:** or people to circulate, chat, investigate other business or to continue work in their groups. Any notices of other events etc to be displayed at a single point and people asked to look at them / sign petitions / sign up to events here. This cuts down on the bad habit of last minute reading of notices right at the end of meetings.

8.45 pm **Report back:** work groups (five minutes each)

9.00 pm priorities and events can be considered and dove-tailed into ideas emerging from the work groups.

9.30 pm **Round up of action points.** Reminder of next events. AOB (15 minutes maximum)

9.45 pm Social / drink

“ One person told me afterwards that she had been to one of our meetings once before but had been put off because it seemed to be so dull and lacking in purpose. She had all but given up on our group but after reading in the local paper about one of our "Don't Choke Ealing" events had decided to come one more time and found the new meeting format so good that she wanted to stay.”

Christine Eborall, Ealing FOE

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Try a meetings make-over

However good you think your group meetings are, there is always room for improvement. There is no harm in suggesting improvements perhaps in the newsletter and saying that the ideas will be tested out over the next few meetings. But do ask the rest of the group what they think and use 'Take five...' or 'New kid...' to provide refreshing ideas for the current format

Your group's meetings should aim to:

- 1 provide continuity by reviewing recent events and progress
- 2 introduce new ideas and topics
- 3 enable discussion and exchange of views
- 4 involve people in forward-planning of events/campaigns
- 5 involve people in policy formation
- 6 provide a focal point for action both by experienced and novice campaigners
- 7 deal with urgent group business
- 8 allow like-minded people to socialise
- 9 have some fun – yes, **fun**.

Other things you may need to consider are:

- * who chairs the meeting, or do you have different people for different items? The group coordinator should not be expected to run the meeting
- * who is responsible for drawing up the agenda (this can be shared)?
- * how are key items recorded at meetings and reflected in the newsletter?
- * does the regular main meeting need to be shadowed by a separate planning meeting?
- * does the group vote on issues or reach consensus? Note: consensus does not mean everyone agreeing; it means everyone agreeing to go along with a decision even if some don't like it much
- * who will bring the biscuits... and buy the drinks at the pub...!

Good meetings are vital to the success of local groups and their campaigns. They make all the difference between groups and individuals feeling motivated and dynamic and a group getting stuck in a rut. Almost everything about your meetings is under your control. So take control and have happy meetings...

“ We switched to a central venue which was easy to get to and did not either rely upon turning up at someone's house (who you might not know) or getting the music turned down in the pub! We meet in Cheltenham's Centre for Change so we also get the warm glow of supporting a sustainable development initiative by hiring the low cost (£5) meeting room every month.

Alex Minshull, Cheltenham FOE



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