

How to Chair a General Meeting

Chairing a General Meeting of the Members is always challenging. Here are some notes on how to do it. The rules of your club may conflict with some of the advice given here in which case your clubs rules should be followed.

General Meetings (AGMs and other General Meetings) are normally chaired by the Club Chairman or, if absent or unwilling to act, by any member of the Committee. If no member of the Committee is present or willing to act then by any member of the club with the agreement of the meeting.

General Meetings belong to the members. They are the ultimate decision making bodies of clubs.

The Chairmans primary duty is to "ascertain the sense of the meeting". That is to assist and allow the meeting to state its opinion. To do this the Chairman needs to ...

1. Maintain Order
2. Make sure that it is clear at all times what business is being done
3. Allow every different shade of opinion to be expressed.
4. Get through all the business of the meeting.

The Chairman is a servant of the meeting, not its master.

Rules of Debate

In Committee meetings it is common to be less formal (unless Committee is large or debates get out of hand). For a General Meeting you'll want to be a little more formal to keep the business under control.

Each motion should be handled in stages

1. Motion is Proposed or Moved
2. Motion is Seconded
3. Motion is opened to General Debate
4. When debate is done Proposer has Right of Reply
5. Vote is Taken

Proposing and Seconding can be done formally without a speech in which case the Proposer and/or Secunder can speak later in the debate.

Motions only need Seconding if your clubs rules say so or if it is normal practice for your club.

If the person who submitted the motion is unable or unwilling to propose it then anyone can. If no-one Proposes or Seconds the motion then it simply falls.

Each speaker should only speak once on the matter. Don't allow repeated contributions from the same few vociferous participants. Don't allow people to be Jack-in-the-boxes popping up every few seconds.

The Right of Reply is to allow points raised in the debate to be answered by the Proposer. No new points may be made (as they cannot be responded to by those at the meeting).

Rather than hearing everyone who wants to speak, voice should be given to every different opinion. If needed you should specifically ask for opinions that have not been heard rather than have a parade of people saying the same thing over and over again.

Do not allow conversations across the floor. If this starts to happen simply say "through the chair please".

Do not allow side conversations. Stop these by simply saying "Only the one speaker at a time please".

Amendments

Members normally get horribly confused by amendments. It is a challenge for the Chairman to make sure that members know what is being done.

The meeting needs to debate the amendment and vote on it. Then continue debating the main motion.

Always get the secretary to write down the amendment and read it out before debate on the amendment and before the vote on it.

Needs lots of care if you have multiple amendments, deal with them one at a time. Keep it clear and rational. If you have multiple amendments they should be taken in a rational order. If needed discuss with the meeting what would be the best order.

Grouping Motions

Motions which conflict with each other should be arranged in groups. If one motion in the group is passed then the remaining motions automatically fall. This is to avoid a meeting making contradictory decisions. Once a meeting has decided something that should hold until the next meeting.

Chairmans Opening Remarks on Motions

Suggest you state the following when you get to the motions ...

1. Each motion will be Proposed and Seconded.
2. Each member may normally speak once during the debate so please say everything you want to in one go
3. We want to hear every different opinion so please avoid speaking if your point has already been made.
4. All speakers should address the Chair, no side conversations please
5. Proposer will have a right of reply to answer points made but not to introduce new points
6. Votes will not be counted unless the voting is too close to call.

Voting

- Normally by show of hands.
- No need to count unless it is close (never any need to count abstentions)
- Must also count proxies if they might or would make a difference.
- Special Motions need to reach (don't need to exceed) 66%, two-thirds or 75% depending on your clubs rules.

If the majority needed is two-thirds then there must be at least twice as many people voting for it as voting against it. If the majority needed is 75% there must be at least three times as many voting for it as voting against it. If the needed majority is 66% then you'll need to get your calculator out which is why two-thirds is better than 66%. No rounding up!

IVCs spend too much time counting votes. If it is clear from the show of hands whether or not a motion is carried or lost then that is good enough. It is the Chairmans job to 'call it'. If the Chairman is at all unsure then he/she should call for a count. Any member of the meeting can call for a count and such a call should not be resisted unless the member is obviously being vexatious. If the Chairman wants to resist such a call he/she would be well advised to get the informal agreement of the meeting.

Counting abstentions is a waste of time.

The Proposer and Secunder of a motion do not have to vote for it.

Quorum

Work out before the meeting how many votes you need at the meeting to be quorate. These votes can be present in person or by Proxy.

If not quorate within a reasonable time (say 30 mins but might depend on your rules) the meeting should be adjourned. That is postponed to another day.

The meeting should be stopped if it becomes inquorate as it is not competent to conduct business (some clubs rules might only require a meeting to be quorate at the start).

Business conducted at a meeting invalidly, such as when inquorate, is valid unless challenged by someone within a reasonable time.

Polls

A Poll is a written record of the vote.

Proxies are normally only counted on a Poll. This is so that a record is maintained of how a proxy used a persons vote in case there is a dispute later.

Normally a poll must be held if asked for by ...

- The Chairman of the Meeting
- Enough Members eligible to Vote (your rules might, exceptionally, have something to say about this).

The Chairman must call a Poll if he knows or thinks it possible that a Poll will produce a different result to a show of hands, this is so that Proxies are counted.

There is a common law right to have a Poll and it can't be refused. A poll is a pain because it takes so long.

A poll is not a secret ballot although normally a committee would keep the details to themselves unless there was a good reason not to.

Before a General Meeting you should prepare some simple bits of paper with a Poll Number (to identify the poll) and other information such as the example shown here.

Poll No. 5	
Voter Name:	
Proxy Name:	
FOR	
AGAINST	

You can then record in the minutes something like “a poll was taken (poll number 5)”.

If a poll is held you can hand out a Poll slip, one to each member and for each person who is a proxy, one for each member that they are proxy for. Good idea to have a list of all the people who are proxies and how many proxies they hold before the meeting.

Get the meeting to appoint a couple of scrutineers and once the poll slips have been collected they can get to work dividing the slips into For, Against and Spoilt. The meeting can continue while they work with the results which can be declared later at a convenient point in the meeting. (The Chairman should examine and agree the Spoilt papers).

Procedural Motions

These can be a pain but are OK if dealt with quickly. You can refuse to hear them if someone is obviously using them for a disruptive or vexatious purpose (good idea to get the agreement of the meeting if you try to do this).

These are some of the most common ones.

"Point of order"

Must state that the Rules of the Meeting are not being followed or there is some other serious anomaly. Has priority over all other business. Amongst other uses, used to point out that meeting is (or might be) inquorate.

"That the question be put"

"That we Move to a Vote"

"Vote"

That we stop debating and move straight to the vote
Can be moved at any time during a debate, but not by anyone who has moved, seconded or spoken to the motion.

No Seconder required and no debate permitted. Put to the vote immediately.

If Carried, no Right of Reply, just Vote

"That we move to Next Item"

"Next Business"

"Next Item"

That we abandon this item, do not have a vote and move to the next item of business.

Can be moved at any time during a debate, but not by anyone who has moved, seconded or spoken to the motion.

No Secunder required and no debate permitted. Put to the vote immediately.

If passed this item is abandoned and we move on to the next item of Business

"Challenge the Chairmans ruling"

The meeting must be asked if they accept or reject a ruling that the chairman has made.

Can be moved at any time during the meeting.

- Chairman should ask for Secunder (if seconding is in rules or normal practice) and if there is one should vacate the chair to be replaced by some other member while the matter is decided.
- Short debate should then follow and a quick vote.
- Regardless of decision, chairman resumes chair.

Elections

Common procedure is ...

- The candidate(s) stand up and say why they would be brilliant for the job.
- The members put what questions they want
- The candidate(s) leave the room
- Possibly further discussion of the candidate(s) character flaws or suitability
- Vote
- Candidate(s) called back to be told who has been unluckily been elected.

It is a good idea to make sure that candidates not present are willing to stand. No reason not to give them a ring.

It seems to becoming more common to accept people doing various 'jobs' for the club without being on the Committee and so also accepting responsibility for the clubs Corporate Governance.

Chairman or Chairperson or Chair?

At the risk of being controversial I think too much is made of the use of the word "Chairman". I am quite happy for it to be used in a genderless way as is the word "Manager".

I know some women are offended by the possibly gender specific nature of the word Chairman, as a balance I would like to observe that avoiding the use of the word "man" as part of a word can also be offensive to men.

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Birmingham and other IVCs