

The Role of a Secretary

Most organisations have a secretary, either elected at the Annual General Meeting or appointed from amongst the members of the committee. They have a very important role in making sure that the committee runs smoothly and has the information it needs to run the organisation. The secretary is sometimes known as the honorary, hon or committee secretary. These all mean the same thing.

As secretary, you do not need to do everything yourself. Some jobs can be shared with other committee members and some groups may also have a membership secretary, minute secretary, publicity officer and so on to spread the work.

If your organisation has paid staff they can help with some of the work but they cannot take on the role of secretary. This is an unpaid role and you must be a full, voting member of the committee to take it on.

The job of secretary includes:

Planning and supporting meetings

- Prepare the agenda for the next committee meeting. The agenda includes a list of the main items to be discussed as well as any follow up from previous meetings. You need to discuss it with the chair and other board members to make sure that all their items are included.
- Arrange the meeting room, refreshments and any equipment you may need. Make sure the room is accessible to all your committee members.
- Send out the details for the meeting (date, time and place), the agenda, notes from the last meeting and any other information or supporting papers to all committee members. Ask if any of the members would like the papers in another format, such as larger print, other languages or Braille.
- If you have a constitution, check how many committee members have to be there to make a decision (the quorum). Try to ensure that you have a quorum for each meeting. Without a quorum the committee can only make recommendations.
- Note any apologies from people who can't attend the meeting – people should contact you in advance.

The secretary is also responsible for making sure that all the members of the organisation know about the Annual General Meeting and any Special Meetings and are sent all the right information.

Minutes

Secretaries usually take the minutes of committee meetings. These are an important record of the work of the organisation. You will develop your own style of minute taking but you should:

- ✓ take notes during the meeting and write them up as minutes later. Keep your notes until the next meeting in case there are any questions

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- ✓ record all the decisions that are made. If you are unclear or feel something is important to get right, ask the meeting to agree the wording before moving on
- ✓ always minute any action to be taken, the name of the person who'll be doing it and any deadline for doing it
- ✓ keep the minutes short and to the point - VODA can provide training on Minute Taking, please contact us for details
- ✓ circulate minutes before the meeting, both as a record and as a reminder, especially for people who agreed to do things
- ✓ keep the minutes together in one place such as a minute book or ring binder and take them to meetings with you so they can be referred to if necessary
- ✓ have the minutes of the last meeting agreed (or amended) by the committee and have a copy signed by the chairperson for your records
- ✓ remind people of anything that they have agreed to do. Make sure that members know about any tasks given to them at a meeting they didn't attend
- ✓ keep records and dealing with correspondence
- ✓ keep an up to date contact list for committee members
- ✓ keep an up to date list of the group's members and how to contact them. You may have a separate membership secretary to do this. You should check if you need to be registered under the Data Protection Act by visiting www.ico.org.uk.
- ✓ open and deal with any incoming mail on behalf of the organisation. Mail that you can't deal with should be passed onto the right person or taken to the next committee meeting.
- ✓ make sure that formal and legal letters such as insurance renewals, returns to the Charity Commission and grant letters are dealt within the time limits
- ✓ write letters on behalf of the organisation, keep copies and let people read them if they wish at the committee meetings
- ✓ look after the organisation's records including copies of past minutes, letters to and from the organisation, the original of the constitution and any reports

Other tasks

Annual report: make sure that the organisation produces an annual report giving details of its work over the year and that copies are sent out to the right people

Signing cheques: most organisations need cheques to be signed by two out of three or four named people; the secretary is usually one of these

Staffing: take part in any recruitment, disciplinary or grievance and complaint panels as needed

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Agendas

The agenda sets out what will be talked about at a meeting. A formal meeting must have an agenda that is sent to everyone before the meeting.

An agenda:

- tells people what will be discussed so they can prepare
- gives people a reminder during the meeting, so nothing is forgotten
- helps manage the timing of the meeting
- helps the secretary take notes during the meeting and write them up afterwards

All agendas should include:

- ✓ the name of the organisation
- ✓ the name of the meeting or group
- ✓ the date, time (start and approx finish) and venue of the meeting
- ✓ numbered agenda items, including a subject line and brief description of the item
- ✓ who is leading on each agenda item
- ✓ an approximate time for how long each agenda item will take to go through
- ✓ the purpose of each item, such as 'for approval,' 'for discussion' or 'for information'

Items for discussion and approval are usually more important so more time will be needed for them

Putting items on the agenda

The secretary should set up an easy and fair way for everyone to put items on the agenda. People should contact the secretary a specified time before the meeting with items for the agenda. They should tell you what the item is, how long it will take, the purpose of the item and a brief description.

AOB – Any Other Business

Any other business should only be used for important items that come up after the agenda was put together. Committee members should tell you or the chair before the meeting starts so you can decide whether it is important enough to include in the main part of the agenda. This will try to help prevent important items being discussed in a rush at the end of the meeting.

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