

KEY GUIDES



Minute Taking

2nd edition

Lee Comer
& Paul Ticher

DSC

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DIRECTORY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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About the series

This series of key guides is designed for people involved with not-for-profit organisations of any size, no matter how you define your organisation: voluntary, community, non-governmental or social enterprise. All the titles offer practical, comprehensive, yet accessible advice to enable readers to get the most out of their roles and responsibilities.

Other titles in the series

Also available in this series:

Charitable Status, Julian Blake, 2008

The Charity Treasurer's Handbook, Gareth G. Morgan, 2010

The Charity Trustee's Handbook, Mike Eastwood, 2010

Effective Fundraising, Luke Fitzherbert, 2004

For further information, please contact the Directory of Social Change (see page viii for details).

About the Directory of Social Change

DSC has a vision of an independent voluntary sector at the heart of social change. The activities of independent charities, voluntary organisations and community groups are fundamental to achieve social change. We exist to help these organisations and the people who support them to achieve their goals.

We do this by:

- providing practical tools that organisations and activists need, including online and printed publications, training courses, and conferences on a huge range of topics;
- acting as a 'concerned citizen' in public policy debates, often on behalf of smaller charities, voluntary organisations and community groups;
- leading campaigns and stimulating debate on key policy issues that affect those groups;
- carrying out research and providing information to influence policymakers.

DSC is the leading provider of information and training for the voluntary sector and publishes an extensive range of guides and handbooks covering subjects such as fundraising, management, communication, finance and law. We have a range of subscription-based websites containing a wealth of information on funding from trusts, companies and government sources. We run more than 300 training courses each year, including bespoke in-house training provided at the client's location. DSC conferences, many of which run on an annual basis, include the Charity Management Conference, the Charity Accountants' Conference and the Charity Law Conference. DSC's major annual event is Charityfair, which provides low-cost training on a wide variety of subjects.

For details of all our activities, and to order publications and book courses, go to www.dsc.org.uk, call 08450 777707 or email publications@dsc.org.uk

About the authors

Lee Comer

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Paul Ticher

Paul first took minutes as secretary of a student union finance committee in 1972, and since then has taken minutes for a wide range of meetings, from a local playgroup run by parents to all-day multi-agency liaison and planning meetings. He has also fulfilled most of the other committee roles at one time or another, including being treasurer of a national voluntary organisation and chair of his local school governing body.

Paul's whole career has been in the voluntary sector, and he has spent more than 20 years as an independent consultant and trainer. His focus of interest is in information management, including such areas as the use of information technology, data protection and the management of information services. Paul's other DSC publications include *Information Management for Voluntary and Community Organisations* (with Mike Powell), *The Employment Records Handbook* with Gill Taylor and *Data Protection for Voluntary Organisations*. He has also published numerous articles and research reports into aspects of IT management in the voluntary sector.

Preface

Many hundreds of people have attended the authors' Minute Taking Skills courses over the last 20 years. Each participant had a story to tell. For some, minute taking was a troublesome chore, for others it was a major cause of anxiety. Working in the voluntary sector should offer job satisfaction and a sense of doing something worthwhile, but this is a distant dream for the majority of minute takers, who wrestle tirelessly to transform their notes of chaotic meetings into intelligible minutes. When hardly anyone bothers to read them, the injustice is keenly felt.

Many of the participants' experiences and suggestions have been incorporated into this book. It has been written for them, and for all minute takers in the voluntary sector. We hope that they will use this book to influence those who attend meetings and those who chair them, to recognise the importance of the minute taker's role. When meetings are managed properly, the minute taker might even go home at the end of the day with a share in the sense of achievement of a worthwhile job being done well.

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Introduction

The minute has a long and honourable history. Modern-day committees, chairs and minute secretaries could learn a great deal from the simple origin of the minute – they might seriously consider reinstating traditional methods of minute taking.

Many hundreds of years ago, when meetings first needed to be recorded in writing for parish council records, a minute of time was set aside at the end of each agenda item so that the record could be written. The chairperson summarised whatever had been discussed and agreed, and then said 'Write this down in a minute (that is, 60 seconds)'. At the end of the meeting, the minute secretary would read these minutes back to the group, and, when agreed by all present, the record would be signed as true. (Hence the phrase, still in use today, 'the minutes were taken as read'.)

When the minutes are written directly by hand into a minute book or typed directly onto a laptop in the meeting, no note taking is required. All that is required is that the meeting is well chaired, that each item is summarised by the chair, and that the text of the minute is agreed immediately before it is written or typed.

Many small voluntary organisations continue with the traditional hand-written approach. It has to be said that such minutes, written directly and once only by hand into a hard-bound, stitched book are very much more authentic and reliable than minutes which have been rewritten and typed several times, before finally being approved and filed some weeks or even months later. This can be replicated using a laptop but, because of the nature of a typed electronic document, there is more room to make amendments after the fact, which will make the document inauthentic. By sticking to strict procedures, however, this can be avoided.

We realise that organisations with technology, in-trays, administrative staff and lots of projects and activities to manage have become accustomed to receiving typed minutes. To some extent they are relied on, to remind staff of their tasks and responsibilities, and as a source of information and means of communication. We therefore start from the position that many organisations would find it impossible to return to the old ways of writing minutes. However, undue reliance on minutes – and the expectation that the minute taker can realistically produce a document that fulfils these multiple purposes – can become a time-consuming burden and a wasteful exercise which serves little, if any, useful purpose.

We also recognise that there are many different types of meeting. We have taken the management committee or board as our 'typical' example; these meetings have formal requirements and ways of working that must be in any professional minute taker's repertoire. However, the principles apply to any meeting. We have included suggestions at appropriate points for how a variety of situations might be handled, from small team meetings to wider consultations and forums.

This book aims to help you to avoid the pitfalls and to produce the most useful minutes possible, with the least effort. The book has three main themes. It looks at what should (and should not) be included in your minutes, how they should be laid out and how to achieve that aim.

The fundamental role of minutes is to provide a legally sound record of decisions and of the work of a committee or group. Anything else is almost always a distortion of their purpose. The key points are as follows:

- Minutes must show that a meeting which took decisions did so in a legally valid way.
- Minutes must record the decisions accurately and dispassionately.
- Where decisions set a precedent, or where the meeting has to be accountable to a wider group, the minutes may need to record the reasons for a decision.
- Minutes show that a committee or group has been carrying out its work properly, and that an organisation is holding meetings in compliance with its governing document.
- Minutes must be agreed by the meeting (or by the next meeting of the same committee or group).

Minutes are therefore intricately bound up with the work of a meeting; they are not something to be tacked on afterwards. This means that the minute taker must operate as a full member of the team running the meeting. Although many minute takers are relatively junior members of staff, this does not reflect the importance of their role. Throughout the book we show how the interaction between a good chair and a good minute taker makes the task of both much easier, and contributes in the end to the highest quality minutes.

Although the book is aimed specifically at voluntary organisations, the principles are the same for the meetings of many other organisations. We hope that clerks to school governing bodies, and those involved in church



Minute Taking

This book shows you why minutes matter and how they are vitally important to all organisations. Revised and updated to take account of new ways of working, this new edition (previously known as *The Minute Taker's Handbook*) considers the increasing use of technology and how to manage it to preserve the integrity of minutes.

Using practical examples, the book provides essential, in-depth guidance on how to produce accurate, brief and clear minutes which meet all legal requirements. It includes many tips and techniques to ease the task of minute taking and to lessen the amount of time it can take to produce minutes. It also includes information about the:

- Importance of data management and security
- Impact of virtual meetings on the minute-taking process
- Increasing importance of minutes as regulatory and legal documents

Whether you take minutes regularly or occasionally, or you are involved in managing or chairing meetings and want to be more effective, this book makes indispensable reading.

'Our trustees loved the book so much that they insisted it was recorded in their own minutes!'

**Andie Barlow, Principal Administrator,
Institute of Family Therapy**

'This book helps you to understand the utmost importance of the minute taker's role and how to communicate this to others.'

**Elizabeth Crosley, Secretary to the
Group Head of Fundraising, RSPCA**

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