

Speaking up

A guide to being effective in meetings and in representing consumers

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Introduction

So you've been appointed to serve as consumer representative on a committee and will be expected to attend their meetings regularly. Why did you take on this responsibility?

There are probably two basic reasons why people come to meetings: enjoyment and duty. For most consumer representatives, these two reasons are usually combined.

Enjoyment

Enjoyment may simply be to do with your liking and approving of the committee's main purpose – monitoring bus efficiency or dealing with complaints about water supplies. There may be secondary factors: you might go for social reasons, to network, to talk to people you might not otherwise have met; some people may enjoy the power and responsibility they perceive as being in the remit of the committee. Or you might see a chance to develop a new skill.

Duty

People attend meetings for a variety of reasons: they believe in the cause; arm twisting; perhaps they see an important job to be done that no one else will do. Duty is not necessarily a bad motivation. On the plus side it involves a feeling that there's an important job to be done and it's worth doing well. You might have moral or political commitments that keep you attending, even when some of the aspects of the meeting are tedious. However, on the minus side, a more negative reaction might be *Someone's got to do it or I'm only doing it because no one else wants to*. When this happens, you

might find the meetings unexciting and it's only a sense of contributing to the overall aim of the committee that keeps you coming. Duty alone is a poor motivator. The ideal for any committee is to find a balance between enjoyment and duty that will get the work done and keep people coming.

Using this pack to help

You might be a relative novice in committee work, or have years of experience under your belt. Either way, you will no doubt wish to develop or brush up your committee working skills further. Work through the list on the next page to check whether there are headings listed there which reflect areas where you feel you could improve the way in which you contribute to committee work. If you are a beginner, just concentrate on those sections which deal with preparatory work, such as *Getting started*. If you have a lot of experience of committee work, then go through sections such as *Listening, discussing and decision-making* or *Dealing with difficult situations*. There will obviously be some variation between the ways in which different committees operate, but the headings below should cover most of the issues which arise for committee members.

Getting started

General preparation

The time commitment for meetings can be significant. In addition to the actual travel and attendance time, you should expect the preparation time to be considerable.

Once you have made a commitment to being a committee member, the first step is to find out as much as you can about your committee and the other members.

Are you joining an existing committee? The committee Secretary ought to be able to help you get hold of the necessary information:

- Terms of reference for the committee and any relevant legislation
- Minutes of previous meetings - going back a year should be sufficient, but ask the committee Secretary
- Who the other committee members are and who they represent
- Committee reports such as annual reports and summaries of the committee's activities
- Work plans, priorities or goals and results expected
- Any memorandum of understanding (MOU) covering working relationships with other committees or organisations. MOUs are quite common now and are intended to clarify relationships with other bodies and prevent mis-understandings and crossover of activity
- Policies supporting the committee's work, for example, conflicts of interest, confidentiality, equality

and diversity - even claiming expenses.

Contact the committee Chair and arrange a briefing, preferably well before your first meeting. Most committee Chairs welcome the opportunity to help a new member integrate and become an effective contributor. Do your background research first, based on the matters in the above list and use your time with the Chair to gain a sense of how things work in practice.

Committees and groups have a tendency to use acronyms and jargon. Ask if there is a jargon-buster or glossary. If there is not, it will at least remind the Chair to encourage people to avoid using jargon.

If you are replacing someone, consider making contact with that person to gain a different perspective, although remember, it is just that - a perspective.

If you are joining a new committee, it should have some basic documents, like terms of reference. The committee's first phase of work may entail clarifying its remit and scope, its relationships with other bodies and discussing expectations, priorities and work plans.

Preparing for your first meeting

This meeting is particularly important so don't leave it to the last minute to prepare. You may need to do research or consult your work colleagues on issues. Focus on issues which particularly affect your organisation and consumers. You also need to think about how you are going to present yourself, as first impressions are very important.

The agenda should be a guide to the business of the meeting and not just a list of items. It should also say whether an item is for information, for discussion or

whether a decision is required. Some committee Chairs include an indication of the time allotted to each item, particularly where the agenda is a long one.

Even if you have views and opinions on the entire agenda, prioritise your efforts and focus on what is important and where you can make a difference. People are more likely to listen to you if you are selective in your interventions.

If something important on the agenda is puzzling you, contact the committee Chair or Secretary for further information or advice. If these are not options, make time to discuss it with a senior bureau colleague.

Prepare a short introduction about your experience and what you hope to contribute - and about your bureau and the Citizens Advice service. Half a dozen sentences will do. Don't learn it by heart. You may not use it, but people will want to hear about your knowledge and experience and why your bureau and the Citizens Advice service is represented on this group. It's much easier if you have thought about this in advance. And, if you are not good at small talk, prepare a few conversational openers.

Attending your first meeting

Arrive early as it may give you the chance to meet some of your fellow committee members. If you have not had a pre-meeting briefing with the committee Chair, introduce yourself – and to the Secretary.

Clear your mind of possible distractions. If you are feeling harassed or concerned about office or private matters, it will affect your concentration. If you have to take calls or texts, explain this privately, before the meeting, to

the Chair. It may be that the agenda can be adjusted to accommodate you, or more breaks introduced, to enable all committee members to take calls during those breaks.

Watch how the Chair runs the meeting:

- Are the proceedings quite formal - or relaxed?
- Are members asked about their interests and conflicts?
- Does the Chair ask each person in turn to comment, or just those who indicate that they wish to speak?
- Does the Chair sum up at the end of each agenda item and agree actions?
- Do some committee members speak more than others?
- Is everyone fully engaged? Are their contributions constructive and cooperative?
- Do people pay attention to the ideas and views expressed?

Confidentiality, conflicts of interest and collective responsibility

- Treat the committee proceedings as confidential, unless you are told otherwise.
- Expect to sign a policy on confidentiality. Read it carefully and follow what it says. It may not cover everything, so exercise common sense, for example, by taking care of your laptop, memory sticks and meetings papers.
- If you are unsure about confidentiality, check with the committee Chair what information can be shared

and how widely you can consult (for example, where you wish to obtain the views of work colleagues or organisations not represented on the committee)

- If there is no confidentiality policy, follow your work procedures
- Take care when you are discussing committee work in public, face-to-face or by mobile phone - keep your voice down so you are not overheard.
- If you are working on committee papers in a public place, like a cafe or a train, make sure any confidential material is not visible to curious people.

A conflict of interest occurs when your work duties, or personal interests, interfere or conflict with your committee responsibilities. The committee should have in place a policy and procedure to cover conflicts of interest. You will have thought about potential conflicts, in general terms, when you accepted the invitation to join the committee. Where an actual committee decision could cause a potential conflict for a member, it should be declared.

Committee decisions are collective outputs. You will be expected to abide by them, even if you were a dissenter. If you feel that a decision has not been taken properly or fairly, you should raise it. In the worst case you can resign, but most disagreements can be resolved by rational discussion.

Action points

- Make time to prepare fully - don't leave it to the last minute
- Prioritise your efforts and contributions
- For your first meeting, prepare a short summary of

your relevant experience - and arrive early

- If you are not comfortable making small talk, prepare some conversational openers
- Know the thinking of your bureau and Citizens Advice on agenda items
- Observe confidentiality and, if in doubt, consult the committee Chair
- Declare any conflicts of interest
- Honour all commitments given, for example, on follow up work.

Activity

You have agreed to represent the Citizens Advice service on a newly formed 'Transport users committee' for the community/town/city where you work. When the local authority decided that it could no longer fund its transport committee, this was an opportunity to take a fresh approach towards local transport – hence the creation of this new committee.

The committee's brief is to work with transport operators, providers and local authorities, to press for better public transport and access to it and to encourage an integrated transport approach. Transport operators and providers have a duty to consult with your committee on proposed changes to services or closures of lines or stations. You have been told that the 10 members of the committee include two business representatives, a police liaison officer and the rest represent groups like Age UK and the National Consumer Federation.

What actions should you take to prepare yourself for the first meeting?

Your options:

These are limited as the committee has not met. Find out whether there are terms of reference and read these. Does Citizens Advice and/or your bureau have knowledge and experience you can tap into? What work was done by the previous committee? (Don't spend too much time on this as your committee's brief is to take a fresh approach but an understanding of the issues dealt with could be helpful.). Try and put yourself into the position of your opponents. What are their likely reasons?

Representation

Since consumer representatives serve on a wide variety of different committees, only you will know exactly who you represent on the Committee and how the report back procedure – if there is one – operates. But it is important that you work out just what your constituency is – who you represent, and why – so as to make sure that you involve everyone relevant and ensure that there is two-way communication. It's also important to keep up to date with those you represent, both with what you tell them, and with changes which affect them.

Who do you represent?

While your primary function on your Committee is to serve as a representative of your local bureau and the Citizens Advice service, you should bear in mind that your job overall is to represent consumers and consumer interests in general, and might need to consider how best to do this. You will probably need to consult with others in advance of meetings, so as to be provided with

information and evidence relating to consumer issues that you can present to the Committee. You might also need to feed back information afterwards.

What sort of consumer issues are looked at in the Committee where you serve – are they purely local? In which case, do you need to consult with local groups covering particular issues such as disability, youth and age, transport use, leisure and sport facilities and more specialised problems such as flood relief and airport extensions?

If there is a wider application of some of the issues raised, you might need to contact national bodies: primarily, of course, Citizens Advice, but maybe one of the regulators such as the Advertising Standards Authority, Ofcom or the Press Complaints Commission.

And remember that, while many of the consumers you represent are articulate and able to describe and possibly deal with problems themselves, many are unable to do this for a variety of perfectly good reasons. You are their champion and have a special duty to represent their interests.

Reporting back

If you are required to circulate a report of the Committee meeting you've attended, you might find it sufficient just to circulate the official minutes of that Committee. Or, and preferably if you have the time, you could write a report which focuses on consumer issues so as to highlight these. Check whether your bureau or Citizens Advice has a template or special format for reports.

Here is a checklist for reports. Your report should be:

- Readable and interesting
- Factual, accurate and informative (append any relevant documents)
- Focused on consumer issues and relevant to consumer concerns
- Prompt (it's better to write your report while the meeting is still fresh in your mind)
- Objective, not biased towards your personal opinions unless you make this clear

Most people circulate their reports electronically, but you may need hard copies for those who don't have access to computers. You will also know if there are any people with visual impairment who need to see your report – and can check how they may best access it. If you think that issues have arisen which will be of wider interest, and, in particular, to Citizens Advice, then you should report them to the relevant person or department in Citizens Advice as well as to your local bureau. You should also consider whether to invite the Chair of the committee to comment on your report before distributing it more widely. While you don't want to give him or her editing rights, it's only polite to share it with him/her before circulating it – if there are any controversial or confidential matters that you have (inadvertently) included, then the Chair can guide you and prevent potential slip-ups.

Gathering information and evidence from local sources is really important for Citizens Advice, since it provides unique access to issues which may assume greater importance. They may then decide to contact other local consumer representatives to gauge whether there is a more general problem which needs attention.

Gathering and using evidence

One of your strengths as a consumer representative will be your access to a wide variety of individuals and groups with a consumer interest. How will you contact them to gather opinions and evidence? Here are some suggestions, some of which will be more appropriate to particular issues than others – can you add to this list?

- The traditional media (local radio, newspapers)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, local websites)
- Surveys in doctors' waiting rooms
- Internal CAB staff meetings
- Talks to, and discussions with community groups
- Communications with other local groups who also gather evidence from their members (Age UK, disability groups, special interest groups, such as flood relief, campaigns against supermarkets, transport problems)

Because the Citizens Advice service has a system for collecting evidence from casework with clients, they will be able to help you by pulling out case studies which are relevant to the work of your Committee and which would be essential in support of your contributions. If, for example, you represented consumers on a Thames Water Committee, Citizens Advice could provide you with all the case studies they've had which relate to the experience of Thames Water customers, so you could quote concrete examples. This is valuable material, so you need to be sure that you use it in the most effective way.

Action points

- Make absolutely sure that you know just who you're representing on the Committee
- Ensure that you have effective lines of communication with those you represent and that you keep them up to date with committee actions that affect them and are aware of changes in their circumstances
- Decide on the most efficient reporting back procedure
- If you've decided to write a report on your Committee meetings, use the checklist above to ensure that it is as good as possible.
- Make use of case studies from Citizens Advice to provide evidence if necessary.
- Feed back as wide a range of consumer-relevant evidence as possible to the committee.

Activity

Due to massive cuts in your local authority budgets, maintenance and repair of pavements in your area will not be carried out in the forthcoming year. Who will you consult, and how will you collect evidence to prevent this from happening?

Your options

You will almost certainly come up with a long list of local organisations who should be consulted. Be sure to include disability groups – people with physical and visual problems find uneven pavements particularly problematic – Age UK and parents of young children who have to manoeuvre prams and pushchairs. You could enrol the help of local radio and TV, making sure that they interview concerned members of the public,

and carrying out surveys in doctors' waiting rooms would be a good idea. Make sure that your contact details are given clearly, together with a deadline for the submission of evidence to enable you to get a good case together for the relevant committee meeting.

Making your point in meetings

Making a contribution

It is important that you take part fully and speak up for the people you are representing. If you are someone who finds it difficult to speak in large groups, take the opportunity to speak early in the meeting. It need not necessarily be an important point or argument. Simply saying that you agree with what the previous contributor has said, will do.

Committees are made up of people with very different perspectives and life experiences. Don't take it for granted that people share your views. Be willing to explain why you hold a particular position and be open to having your views challenged. Equally, be willing to question the views of others.

Voice matters

Your voice, and how you use it, is an important part of your delivery. Speak up and speak clearly so you can be heard. In large meetings, check that you can be heard by everyone. If you are feeling nervous it can affect your delivery in any of the following ways:

- Your voice sounds flat or dull – if so, make a conscious effort to inject some energy and enthusiasm into what you are saying
- You speak too quickly – so take your time and slow down – you are entitled to time to present your comments and ideas
- Your voice falls away or drops at the end of sentences – so aim to lift your voice slightly to overcome this
- You don't make eye contact with your listeners – make eye contact with people, in turn
- People are unsure whether you have finished speaking – end on an up note and preferably by summarising your main point.

Don't be afraid to use your feelings. If you feel strongly about an issue, let some of that passion come through and be heard by others.

Structuring your arguments

Make it easy for people to listen. Even willing and engaged listeners find that their attention wanders occasionally.

- Speak clearly and organise your thoughts before you speak
- Be clear on your main point or message and make sure that you get that across
- Don't use jargon, abbreviations or acronyms
- Where you have a relatively straightforward argument to make, use the newsreader's format – state your main point first, and then give your explanation or reasons. It's more direct and works better for the

listener than a series of explanations or reasons leading up to the main point

- If you have a lot to say on a topic, help your listeners by giving verbal signposts. *“I have three points I should like to make. The first is...”*
- Use mini summaries to keep people engaged. *“So having explained why engaging consumers is essential, I now want to comment on the proposals and then suggest how we might modify them.”* This provides a sense of direction for the listeners.

A format for more elaborate arguments or proposals is the **four Ps** approach:

Position: explain where you stand in relation to the issue, i.e. whether or not you support it.

Problem: describe the issue as you see it.

Possibilities: explain what you see as the options.

Proposal: summarise your recommended approach, explaining why.

Persuading and influencing

When a proposal is discussed at a meeting, there is unlikely to be a common view. There will be differing opinions and different levels of interest. For you to persuade your colleagues to support your ideas, you need to know where your support is – and, also, the extent of the opposition.

When you have made your first pitch, listen carefully to the responses and identify who agrees, who is against and, just as important, the undecideds. At a meeting, a real gain would be to persuade the undecideds – and to shift the position of the opponents to being more

receptive, or at least not totally against.

When faced with scepticism or opposition, your best approach is to try and change a view gradually. Show why it is in their interests, or in the interests of the people they represent, that they should see or do things differently. You can continue your work outside the meeting, if necessary.

And, if you disagree fundamentally with a proposal which appears to be well received by others, ask yourself:

- Am I opposed because it undermines what I have always done or thought?
- Can I support any of it?
- Do I fully understand the reasoning of others who support it?
- Is there scope for horse trading - can I concede on part if they agree to my counter-proposal?
- What is best for the interests of the people I represent?
- Is it an important issue where I need to ask for time to consult with my constituency?

Don't be afraid to vote against something if you know that is the right thing to do for the people you represent.

Formal presentations

Important plans or proposals may need to be presented in a formal manner, with PowerPoint slide support.

- Do some research on your audience, i.e. what do they know already?
- Find out, well in advance, what technology is available

- Don't leave it to the last minute to prepare
- Rehearse and time your presentation
- Use slides to *support* what you have to say and use visuals like graphs, pictures and diagrams
- Stick to 4 - 5 bullet points, per slide
- Use the **END** approach to help you decide what to keep and what to dump:
- **Essential** - key points or main arguments
- **Necessary** - explanations, important supporting examples, mini summaries
- **Desirable** - general information, more examples, additional explanatory material, references
- Access the elearning programme on CABlink for advice on giving presentations.

Action points

- Use a structure and verbal signposts to help the listeners to follow your arguments
- Speak early on
- Speak clearly and don't mumble – people want to hear what you have to say
- Make eye contact
- Be open minded to others' views
- Be constructive and don't score points
- Don't be fazed by disagreement
- Take a gradualist approach to dealing with opposition.

Activity

Next week's meeting is important. You have seen the agenda. The main item for a decision is one which really affects consumers' interests. The proposal was discussed at the previous meeting and there was no consensus. However, the Chair, when closing the meeting, said that it was essential that the committee should come up with a way forward and, to facilitate this, a significant portion of the meeting will be devoted to discussing the proposal and agreeing a way forward. As the current proposal stands, you believe that it will damage consumers' interests.

The proposal was put forward by one of the business representatives and received conditional support from another business member. The third business representative said very little at the meeting, so you do not know how he is likely to vote. Age UK agree with you but you are not sure which way the two other non business representatives will vote.

What actions can you take to improve support for your ideas?

Your options:

Before the meeting, make contact with those people likely to support you and with those whose views you do not know. Explain that the topic matters deeply to you and your aim, as a consumer representative, is to ensure that the consumer position gets proper consideration. Your aim when talking to people is to try and find out where each person stands on the issue, without coming across as overtly lobbying. Try and find out what is stopping them from supporting the consumer interest on this issue and why. Then you can start to address this. If

you are not comfortable with contacting people outside the meeting, get to the meeting early in case you can talk to people before the meeting starts.

Have a private word with the committee Chair so it is understood that this is a critical topic and that there will be time for you to have your say.

Networking in breaks

Creating networks

As with other social situations, meetings work well when people respect and understand each other. Investing time in getting to know your fellow committee members will pay off.

Networks are relationships – with a purpose. Sharing is fundamental to successful networking relationships, which generally develop as a result of:

- Shared interests, like work, or representing consumers
- Sharing information and access to contacts
- Collaborating on projects and developing policies

Break times are for networking, for getting to know the rest of the committee. Make a particular effort to get to know people who are important to the people you represent. There may be occasions when you will need the support of others, for an idea or a proposal, so knowing who is likely to back you up is useful. Be willing to share information and contacts

Take opportunities to make new contacts, rather than staying in a huddle with people you know. If you are shy about joining a group of people, a useful rule of thumb is

that it is easier to join an odd numbered group, than one with even numbers. Don't pick a group where people appear to be deep in conversation. Choose a group where you can identify the "leader", position yourself so you can be seen, and wait until there is a gap in the conversation. People who are socially aware should then include you in the group.

Commercial organisations may want to network with you, by inviting you to lunch or a social event. These occasions can be useful, but check your bureau's policy on attending. A hospitality event is still a business event. You are there to increase your knowledge and get to know people better. Attending an event should not compromise your independence, provided you remember that your role is representing consumers.

Action points

- Take plenty of business cards and hand them out when you introduce yourself
- When someone hands you a business card, take the time to read it – and add the information later to your contact list
- Display your name badge prominently, at eye level and preferably on your right side – where it is easier to read when someone shakes your hand
- Don't worry about remembering everyone's name – although if you repeat someone's name, when you are introduced, this does help fix it in your memory
- If you forget someone's name, just own up and apologise
- Use break times to find out more about the interests

and concerns of your fellow committee members and what they feel strongly about

- Be friendly to everyone and, at the same time, identify potential allies
- Be willing to share useful information.

Activity

One of the commercial members of your committee has invited you to what looks likely to be a lavish corporate hospitality event at Wimbledon: a champagne reception, a buffet lunch and then a ticket to the Centre Court. You have always wanted to go to Wimbledon.

How should you respond to the invitation?

Your options:

Find out whether any of the other non-commercial members have been invited.

Discuss it with your bureau head. If it is agreed that it would be useful for you to attend, treat it as a networking event, get to know the other guests, hand out your business cards and write a short note afterwards, of any useful contacts made – to share with your colleagues.

Listening, discussing and decision-making

Listening

When people go to a meeting they usually hope that they will be able to express their point of view and that other participants will take notice of it. For that to happen, others must listen, and the listening needs to be full and attentive. People don't just need to be heard. They want to be understood and respected, and they need the reason for their views to be acknowledged, and their feelings to be understood.

But that kind of listening doesn't always take place. People are anxious to get their views across and to make sure that they are being heard. Once they have said their piece, they initially feel relieved, but then realise that no one seems to have really taken it in. This is frustrating, and they either give up and remain silent, or repeat themselves again and again.

When people listen well, good listening somehow takes the effort out of speaking and putting your case forward. You don't have to repeat yourself, because you know you were heard the first time. You feel people are interested in you and what you have to say. Even if people disagree you feel they respect you. When good listening is taking place, the whole discussion tends to move faster and the group is able to explore issues in greater depth.

Making yourself heard

So what can you do if you feel that you are not being listened to? This can be tricky, more especially if you are a

new member of the committee.

Obviously, careful preparation so that you are sure of your facts will give you added confidence. You can model good listening yourself, both by what you say and by your non-verbal responses (such as smiles, nods, facial expressions of interest). Identifying another member of the group who you feel **is** listening to you and speaking directly to them could help – you might even consider talking to them outside the group and asking for their advice as to how you can get your points across.

If you have the confidence to do it, you could try commenting in a constructive way as to on what's going on in the meeting, for example: *"It seems to me that people are finding it hard to listen at the moment"* or *"The discussion is going so fast that it's hard for people to take anything in."* Remarks like this draw attention away from the content of the discussion and back to how people are feeling or behaving and should alert other committee members to the need for better listening.

Discussions

Listening attentively and with real respect is a skill that can be acquired relatively easily. Much more difficult is listening carefully and, **at the same time**, holding on to your point of view and expressing it in a discussion. Here are some suggestions for the different behaviours which are helpful and unhelpful during discussions. Which have you observed, or done yourself? What effects did those different behaviours have?

Helpful behaviour

- Speaking briefly
- Supporting another speaker
- Explaining something
- Summarising an argument
- Rephrasing what someone has said to make it clearer
- Expressing valid doubts
- Asking others for their views
- Showing interest in what others have suggested

Unhelpful behaviour

- Pouring cold water on every proposal
- Changing the subject
- Talking only about yourself
- Judging other people
- Using sarcasm to make a point
- Speaking before you've worked out what to say
- Attacking individuals
- Interrupting others

It will obviously be down to the Chair of the committee to run discussions in a way which enables the members of the committee to get through the business of the day in a satisfactory manner. But you might need to ask yourself whether s/he is doing it in a way which enables those who want to contribute to do so. Different styles of chairing are needed for different types of discussion. For a focussed discussion, which has to lead to a decision, a

good Chair should:

- Present the issues clearly
- Summarise frequently
- Set a time limit on the discussion
- Limit the number of speakers.

For an open, less focussed discussion, a good Chair may find it useful to:

- Invite people to speak, possibly encouraging those who find it difficult for some reason
- Look for what is not being said in the discussion and saying it
- Clarify points that are made confusingly
- Encourage people to speak openly by doing so him/herself.

You will, of course, want to support the Chair as far as you can, and pointing out and commenting on the nature of the discussion might help to steer it in the right direction.

Decisions

Reaching well-debated decisions in meetings gives you a sense of achievement – especially if the decision has gone the way you wanted it to. But there is nothing more frustrating than endless inconclusive debates which wind up with no decision, or just a decision to come back to the problem another time. You need to be clear where decisions are really taken in your committee, and what process leads to satisfactory decisions.

When you have attended a couple of meetings of your committee, see whether decisions are being taken in a way that you feel is both effective and reflective of

its ethos. Look at the recent decisions taken by the committee and decide whether you think they were dealt with in the right way.

Decisions need to be discussed by the major committee rather than being delegated to a sub group, or paid employee where:

- A principle is involved
- A precedent may be set
- A new area is involved
- The decision is a big one (in terms of money, perhaps, or its impact on the organisation)
- The issue is politically sensitive.

As a new member of the committee, you will need to observe what's going on, rather than weighing in and challenging decision making straight away. Noting how the committee makes decisions, and deciding whether you think they are going about it in what you believe to be the right way, will help you to make well-evidenced and thoughtful suggestions in the future.

Stages of decision-making

When a decision is taken, it needs to go through various stages to ensure that it has the maximum impact. You can observe whether your committee takes its decisions in this structured way and try to ensure that it does so in the future. The stages are:

- 1. Define the problem** – this is the most critical and easily forgotten stage of decision-making. If a problem is well-defined, it is easy to think of solutions to it. If it is badly thought out, fuzzily defined or badly worded, the whole process may go awry. This stage often gets

muddled up with the second stage – you think you have the problem defined, but as you start to gather information, so many new aspects of it appear, that you are no longer clear what it is you are making a decision about. To some extent, it is inevitable that the process of gathering information will throw up new aspects of a problem so the more work that can be done on both these stages in advance of the meeting the better.

2. **Gather information** (possibly done outside the meeting) – are there statutory or regulatory requirements which affect this decision? Is anyone else carrying out this task, or part of it? Answers also need to be found to questions such as who will be affected by the decision and who should be consulted, what views people have expressed about the problem, what the financial implications of the decision will be, and what organisational and/or practical issues will be raised.
3. **Suggest solutions** – sometimes the solution to a problem is an obvious one: there is only one option and it is a good one. More often you will have many potential solutions, or none.
4. **Evaluate solutions** – this is the process of weighing up the solutions one against another. Sometimes there are specific criteria which must be considered, but there may also be more general criteria, such as whether the decision is on line with the committee's principles, aims and policies, whether it is practical, affordable and legal and, most important, does it really solve the problem?
5. **Take the decision** - which could be by vote or consensus.
6. **Implement the decision.**

Action points

- Check whether others are listening to you
- Work out whether you are listening as effectively as possible
- Locate where and how decisions are really made in your committee
- Consider whether you are happy about the way in which decisions are taken in your committee
- If you're unhappy, decide how you might make suggestions for improvement in the future.
- Decide what you might do to improve the decision-making process in your committee.

Activity

You have been attending meetings of the local energy consultative committee for a while now, and initially you had some trouble in getting your head round some of the technicalities and detailed discussions. But you've been doing extensive research, have checked with your local bureau as to the type of complaints they've had and now want to raise the committee's consciousness as to the consumer viewpoint. The trouble is that you're finding it almost impossible to catch the Chair's eye – and you seem to be completely invisible to one or two of the most expert members.

Your options:

First of all you could try having a private word with the Chair, explaining your concerns. If this doesn't work, try going through the agenda in advance and picking a subject where you can be totally confident that you have a lot to offer. Prepare what you need to say, and, when

the right moment comes, speak up! See **Voice matters** under **Making your point in meetings** above for some suggestions. As you speak, make good eye contact with as many people as possible, and make a mental note as to who seems most interested in, and impressed by what you have to say. This person could be a useful ally in the future.

Dealing with difficult situations

Socially, a meeting is an odd sort of situation: there are all sorts of rules, often unspoken, about how to behave. It's also different from a normal social occasion: there may be little personal contact, you might be expected to conform to a role with which you're unfamiliar or even uncomfortable, and everything you do is very public. Not surprisingly, meetings make some people anxious or nervous and this can often lead to difficult situations. Obviously, people's reactions are going to vary a great deal: one person's difficult situation might be someone else's finest hour, but what would you identify as a difficult situation for you?

Here are a few examples of potentially difficult situations. Add any you want to the list and then think about how you might deal with them.

- Endless agendas
- Long, inconclusive discussions
- Avoidance of decisions

- Non-implementation of decisions
- Incomprehensible or highly technical content
- Seemingly irrelevant content
- Dominance by one or a few people
- More?

It might be very daunting, especially if you're new to the committee, to improve some of these difficult situations. What could you do?

Asking for help and taking action yourself

If what you find difficult is primarily to do with the content of what is being discussed, it would be worth asking your Chair or Secretary outside the meeting as to whether information is available which will give you a better understanding of the issue, or whether there is a person or persons who could explain things clearly.

It's going to be a lot more difficult to raise issues relating to the way in which a committee is run and you will need to be very tactful, as what you say may well come over as a criticism.

Comments on the length of time taken to cover the agenda or to discuss agenda items might come over better if they were backed up with specific suggestions as to how work on a particular item might be delegated to a sub-group with specialist knowledge or good representation of the target group concerned.

As a member of the committee, you have every right to know that decisions you've all taken, or discussed, be progressed and implemented. So here you would be

justified in asking at the earliest opportunity just what progress has been made and, if none, why not.

If your problem is dealing with someone who consistently dominates the proceedings, then it could be worth linking up in some way with a colleague who you have observed reacting in the same way as you. You might catch their eye in the meeting and exchange glances or you might sympathise with each other on the way home. Knowing that there is someone else who finds another committee member overwhelming can help a lot. It might also be, of course, the member in question is genuinely expert and knowledgeable and you need to listen carefully to everything s/he has to say!

Dealing with disagreement

If someone disagrees with your proposal or suggestion, don't be discouraged. Check that you have fully understood the argument by checking with them along the lines of *"If I have understood you correctly, what you are saying is ...,"* and then summarise what you think that person has said. It is a good tactic because it shows the other person that you have been listening. It also gives you time to think and, if you have misunderstood, it provides an opportunity to be corrected and saves wasting time.

Be open minded to others' ideas and suggestions. Even if a proposal runs counter to what you want, ask yourself, *"What's good about this?"*, to establish whether there is any basis for building a bridge between it and your proposal. Committees generally operate on the basis of consensus. Could you incorporate what someone else has suggested without diluting or changing your proposal too much? It may not be possible, but it's worth

a try. Sometimes you may feel that it is important to stick with what you are suggesting, since to do otherwise would mean you are not representing sufficiently the views of the Citizens Advice service and consumers.

And what if you disagree fundamentally with a proposal that others seem to like? Well, much of the above applies, but in reverse. Ask yourself these questions:

- Are you opposed because it undermines what you have always done or thought?
- Can you support any of it?
- Do you fully understand the reasoning of those who support it?
- Is there scope for horse trading, where you concede on part if they can agree to a shift on an aspect which really matters to you?
- What is best for the interests of the people you represent?
- Is it an important issue where you need to ask for time to consult with your “constituency”?

It is the responsibility of the Chair to achieve consensus, but provided you have been fair minded in the way you have evaluated it, don't be afraid to vote against a proposal if you know that is the right thing to do for the people you represent.

Guidelines for disagreeing (and being disagreed with)

If you're going to disagree openly with someone on your committee, bear these points in mind.

- Have good intentions – so be clear about your own motives. Criticism should be done in a spirit of mutual respect with the intention of achieving changes that both people will be happier with.
- Be concrete – you should aim to be concrete and specific and avoid generalisations. Quote instances and examples of what you are disagreeing about. Don't make vague statements and don't speculate about people's motives. **Never** make sarcastic, off the cuff comments about what another committee member says or does.
- Express your feelings clearly – the need to disagree is usually associated with strong feelings (anger, resentment, frustration, hurt to name but a few) so acknowledging them can help you to take responsibility for your part of a problem, and make sure that others don't misunderstand you. It's better to say *I feel angry*, or *I feel disappointed* rather than *You make me feel angry*, or *You disappoint me*.
- Say what you want – make it clear **who** you want to do something, **what** you want them to do and, important, say what you **do** want them to do rather than what you **don't** want.
- Explain why you want something – it's hard for people to change if they can't see the point! In the long run it is only understanding that can persuade people to make changes. And working out a clear and concise explanation could, also help you to understand just why you want the other person to make changes.

But you also need to be prepared to receive criticism!
Here are some guidelines

- Paraphrase – when someone disagrees with you, you need to be sure that you understand them correctly. If your feelings are running high or you are anxious, you are quite likely to hear what you expect to hear rather than what is actually being said. So summarising what you believe has been said could be helpful.
- Listen carefully - and make sure that they have a clear idea of what it is they are disagreeing with you about. Once you are absolutely clear what they are talking about, you will have a better idea of how to deal with it.
- Deal with defensiveness – it's really hard not to feel defensive when someone openly disagrees with you. So you need to be prepared to anticipate defensiveness so that you can identify it and deal with it as best you can when it occurs. It's only human to feel bad when you're being criticised and rush to defend yourself and your actions. But try not to let your natural desire to justify yourself take over and make you overreact. Staying calm and rational is probably your best defence!

'Difficult' people

While some conflicts are unavoidable, and just have to be worked through, a reason which is often identified as a problem is to do with one or more members of the committee, who other people find it difficult to deal with. People say or think things like, *It would all be better if Arthur could just keep his mouth shut*, or, *Ahmed's solutions are just not realistic*. Labelling someone as 'difficult' is very common; but scapegoating someone and shifting the blame for conflict onto that person or persons, is not the answer. You've probably heard

it said that there is no such thing as a difficult person, just a difficult situation. People who generate conflict in meetings are not usually out to cause trouble, but behave in a difficult manner, quite possibly for defensive reasons that they may not necessarily understand. They may not even be aware that their behaviour is a problem at all.

It may be that the Chair of the committee is dealing with the person in question, and you don't have to worry about them. The exception to this is when someone makes a comment or remark that is discriminatory – this needs challenging straightaway. But if the Chair, for whatever reason, is not coping with a 'difficult' person, what possible ways of coping might be open to you?

What to do about 'difficult' people

The way of least resistance is to accept that the person is the way s/he is, and decide that you'll just have to ignore their behaviour. But this is not a good solution. You could try quietly disagreeing with him or her – there are suggestions above– in an attempt to alert them to the effect they are having on their committee colleagues. It may well be that you become aware that other members of the committee share your reactions, and could discuss with them how best to deal with the problem. Eventually, and if nothing else works out, you might need to actually confront them, which is probably the most honest approach. You need to be confident and supportive to make this succeed, not judgmental or angry. Remember that it is the person's behaviour that you're commenting on, not them as a person. Tell him or her as concretely as you can what s/he is doing that you object to. Say how you feel and what you want him or her to do.

For example. *Kim, you've been talking a lot about what you think we should do and I'm feeling rather overwhelmed by the flow of words. I'd appreciate it if you could let others have their say, since I'm keen to hear what everyone else thinks.* Another point you need to consider is whether other committee members are finding YOU difficult, which you need to avoid if you want to be a good team member.

Feeling nervous or anxious in meetings

Many difficult situations relate to different levels of anxiety which you, or others around you, might experience. You might feel anxious on behalf of the committee, especially if it is faced with major problems and questions such as *Are we going to succeed? What will happen if funding runs out? or How will we cope when...?* These are anxieties which affect the whole committee, and you would be justified in discussing them openly during a meeting. You may well find that other members share these concerns and are grateful to you for bringing them up.

Other anxieties are more personal, and involve questions such as *Will people criticise me for... , Will I manage to say what I want? or Will people think me stupid if I say... ?* Anxieties like these may cause people to talk too much or too little in meetings, be so worried that they can't or don't listen to what's going on, wander off the point because they're too anxious to concentrate or clam up and say nothing at all. Many people find it hard to overcome issues like these, so if you have feelings like this you are not alone.

Building confidence

Being surrounded by people who are very expert in the subject under discussion or who have been on the committee for a long time and know (nearly) everything and everybody can be very intimidating. You might feel that you are being bamboozled with jargon, or technical detail. You just have to remember that in your case you **do** have a special subject – consumerism – and that you’ve been invited to serve on this committee because of that specialist knowledge and stance. Also, don’t forget that the Citizens Advice service has a very good reputation, and people will respect you for this. It does help if you read the committee papers in advance, checking on whether you want to speak and making sure of your facts. Once you’ve started making good points and convincing arguments people will appreciate that you have a lot to offer and welcome your initiatives.

Action points

- Identify any potentially difficult situations in your committee meetings
- Work out what you might do to improve things you’re unhappy about
- Be prepared to deal with disagreement, either from others or from you
- Consider what causes you to feel nervous or anxious in meetings (if you do!!) and what you might do about it.

Activity

Maurice dominates every committee meeting that you’ve been to – taking the floor and speaking at length about every point on the agenda. The Chair seems unwilling

or unable to control his behaviour in any way. Not only do committee meetings take longer, but you feel that they are just an ego trip for Maurice to display his encyclopaedic knowledge of the railway industry and to prevent anyone else from expressing an opinion. What might you do?

Your options:

You could try having a very private word with the Chair, Secretary or Vice Chair (if there is one) explaining that you find Maurice intimidating, making it very difficult for you to put your viewpoint forward (which is, after all, a very valid one). If this doesn't work, you could observe at the next meeting whether there are other members who react in the same way as you do, and confer with them afterwards as to what might be done.

Alternative activity

You are completely taken aback at a meeting where Dave, a long-standing member with an extensive background in the industry, suddenly unleashes a blast of criticism, saying that he is absolutely fed up with your banging on about the consumer viewpoint. "We've got to be realistic here", he shouts, "There's absolutely no funding for all these special advice facilities! You come in here, knowing nothing about how the real world works and try telling us what to do. I'm absolutely fed up with it."

How would you react and what might you do?

Your options:

After the initial shock – and one would hope that the Chair might intervene to calm things down - you need to think about whether you have heard him correctly, so

you could summarise what you think you've heard back to him. He might just not be aware of how threatening he sounded. You need to be quiet and calm – shouting back would only make the situation worse. But you do need to respond – otherwise he will assume that you've accepted that he is entirely right.

Postscript

Suppose you decide that, after having tried working on the committee for a while, you are not the right person to be doing this job, or you need to leave for domestic or other reasons? Here are some suggestions for how you could make the transition as painless as possible, both for you and for the committee.

- Let the Chair/Secretary and your bureau know about your intentions, giving as much notice as possible
- Consult with your bureau to try to identify a successor and let the Chair/Secretary know who this is
- Provide your successor with as much background information as possible (though trying not to overwhelm him/her!)
- Thank the other members of the committee for their support/help during your time with them.

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