Good Practice Guide to Committee Servicing

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Background to this Guide

This guide has been produced both for new and existing committee secretaries in order to establish a level of consistency in the approach to committee servicing and to share existing good practice. It is also hoped that the guide will be helpful in setting the expectations of Chairs in relation to the role of committee secretaries.

The guide has been developed following two training sessions with Academic Services staff and the good practice described here is the result of these discussions.

If you have any queries about committee servicing, please contact Louise Sharman, Student and Academic Services Manager (l.v.sharman@reading.ac.uk or 0118 378 6180).

Before the Meeting

When and how to prepare for a committee

In some respects preparation for a committee meeting starts at the previous meeting and this will be covered later under agenda setting. If you are taking over a committee, try to talk to the previous Secretary to get an insight into the committee’s core business, current issues and how the Chair likes to work. The previous meeting papers will also give some of this information.

The dates of meetings which appear in the University Calendar are prepared by the University Secretary and relayed to the Council in July each year. If dates of meetings have not already been set, this will need to be your first job. When canvassing for dates, check that the Chair and any vital attendees (including you) are available before offering a range of dates and timeslots (normally at least five) to the wider group. It is preferable to arrange a series of meetings for your committee or working group as it is easier to cancel meetings if not required than to schedule them in busy diaries.

In general, you should start preparation around a month beforehand as follows:

As soon as date is set

- Book a room

Rooms can be booked by sending an email to Central Room Bookings and Timetabling Office (CRBTO) at rooms@reading.ac.uk. You should include the following information:

- Date of meeting
- Duration of meeting
- Number of attendees
- Equipment required
- Name of committee
- Name of Chair
- Preferred location (optional)
Rooms for all University Calendar meetings are timetabled by CRBTO at the start of the academic year and a list can be found here [http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/crbt/crbt-about/News/crbt-news.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/crbt/crbt-about/News/crbt-news.aspx)

### 3-4 weeks before

- Draft agenda and send to/meet with Chair to agree
- Request papers/agenda items from key members of committee
- Chase actions from previous meeting
- If you require the layout of the room to be changed a porter can be booked through the FMD helpdesk.

### 2 weeks before

- Send reminder to contributors about deadline for papers (a week and one day before meeting)

### 1 week before

- Collate papers – check they are coherent and on brand then add agenda item number
- Send agenda and papers via email and/or hard copy
- If there are external members on the committee, papers should be sent slightly longer than one week in advance where possible. External members should always receive papers in hard copy and papers should be accompanied by directions to the University and meeting room.

### Less than 1 week before

- Collate apologies as they are received
- Book parking for external members
- Order catering (including lunch if required)

Catering can be ordered online via Eat online up to two days before meeting, or via [c.bookings@reading.ac.uk](mailto:c.bookings@reading.ac.uk) and details of how to order catering, can be found here [http://www.reading.ac.uk/catering/Cater_Delivered_catering.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/catering/Cater_Delivered_catering.aspx) whilst menus can be found here [http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/catering/Eat_to_you_Menu_2012-13.pdf](http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/catering/Eat_to_you_Menu_2012-13.pdf)

As a general rule, tea and coffee should be ordered for every meeting. Water should be provided during periods of warm weather and in most cases biscuits should not be ordered unless agreed with the budget holder. Lunch (generally sandwiches) is only provided for meetings which span the 12.30-2pm period or on an *ad hoc* basis, for instance if members external to the University will be attending.

### How to draft an agenda

All documents relating to committees should be created using the Reading document template to ensure that they are on brand. These should be available automatically on the network when you create a new document or can be found here [http://www.reading.ac.uk/dps/visualidentity/dps2-visualidentity.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/dps/visualidentity/dps2-visualidentity.aspx)
In creating an agenda you need to consider items from previous meetings which either need to be updated (matters arising) or considered as a standalone agenda item. It is therefore useful to look at the minutes of the previous meeting as a first step in drafting the agenda.

The following standard items should always be included on the agenda:

- Date/time/location of meeting
- Name and title of Secretary
- Minutes of the last meeting (for all Committees these are in draft until approved by the next meeting)
- Matters arising (not appearing elsewhere on the agenda)
  
  Main Business
- Standing items (such as reports from sub-committees)
- Any other business
- Date(s) of the next meeting (s)

The main business of the meeting forms the middle section of the agenda and it is likely that you will become aware of these agenda items through contact with the Chair and other key colleagues between meetings.

Once you have drafted an agenda you should send to/discuss with the Chair and, where relevant, key contributors (such as the appropriate head of a service, such as the Library, or an Estates and Facilities Project Manager) in order to capture any additional items, or change the order.

It is important to consider the order of the agenda and it is useful to group items according to the action the committee is asked to take. In practice there may be overlap in the action required but as a general rule the following groupings can be used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For discussion/ consideration</th>
<th>Complex items which may have been requested by the committee at a previous meeting or submitted by a member of the committee or office with an associated function. These items need sufficient time to be discussed in detail as the committee may have been asked to give approval to specific recommendations or give a review on a particular matter.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For approval</td>
<td>Straightforward requests for approval which may be new items or items that may have been previously discussed by the committee but need final agreement. There is likely to be some overlap between this and the above grouping and the distinction will become clearer when dealing with actual submissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For report or note</td>
<td>Regular/standing items from reporting committees or offices which can be assumed not to require discussion unless specifically indicated – if action is required it is helpful to draw attention to this on the agenda.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An example of an agenda is attached as appendix 1.

If the committee features items which include personal data or are deemed to be commercially sensitive under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 1998 the agenda may need to be structured to reflect this. Further guidance on this is available from Information Management and Policy Services or at http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/imps-index.aspx
How to involve the Chair

The Chair is pivotal to the smooth and effective running of the committee meeting and it is really important to get to know your Chair and how they like to work. When taking over a new committee it is always a good idea to meet with the Chair to understand what their aims for the committee are and to find out what they consider to be the current issues and activities.

You will liaise with the Chair primarily when establishing an agenda and agreeing the minutes and reports which will result from the meeting, as well as assisting during the meeting itself. They may be happy to liaise via email or phone, or prefer to meet in person, particularly when establishing an agenda. For more senior committees such as University Boards, it may be worth scheduling a pre-meeting with the Chair, to be held after the papers have been produced, at which each agenda item can be discussed in detail and an approach to the item agreed.

Preparing Papers

Once the agenda is agreed it is your responsibility to gather and circulate the papers for the meeting. In the process of forming the agenda you will have liaised with various people who will have agreed to submit papers and you should give them a deadline of a week and one working day before the meeting to submit these to you.

Matters Arising

You should also have chased up any outstanding actions and, where these do not warrant their own agenda item, updates on these become matters arising. Where there are four or fewer updates these can be included as part of the agenda document; if there are any more than this a separate matters arising report is preferable and an example of this is attached (appendix 2). The matters arising report should either include a written update (possibly with supporting paper) or give an indication that an oral update will be given at the meeting. If an oral update is promised and the individual then sends apologies, remember to ask them for a written statement regarding the action which can be read out during the meeting.

Collating Papers

When you receive a paper you should check it through to make sure that it is clear both in its narrative and in the action it is requesting from the committee. If you feel that the paper is unclear you should either ask the contributor to clarify it or, if more appropriate, ask the Chair to do so.

Lengthy documents should be accompanied by a cover sheet which is a summary of the key points of the item and the action required. Cover sheets should be provided by the contributor. An example of a cover sheet is attached at appendix 3.

Wherever possible papers should be submitted to you electronically in a format which will allow them to be spellchecked and numbered according to their agenda item. Documents should be numbered in the top right hand corner on the first page e.g., Item 4. Page numbers are also helpful for ease of reference during the meeting. Ideally contributors should submit papers using the University brand templates.
Hard copy papers can be scanned to allow them to be circulated electronically otherwise they should be labelled manually with the agenda item number.

It is recommended that documents held online are stored in a dedicated folder for that committee and one which can be accessed by others in case of absence (in a shared drive for example). Files should be named and dated in such a way that it is clear to a third party what they are and you should also use a method of version control e.g.,

Committee on Basket Weaving agenda 18-9-10 (draft v1).doc
Committee on Basket Weaving minutes 18-9-10 (final).doc

Blackboard is no longer used to store and communicate committee papers, except for Student Liaison Committees.

A hard copy of papers must be retained for committees which are defined by Ordinance (such as Council, Senate, Faculty Boards etc.). For other committees, it is worth considering whether a hard copy record is required and to agree this with your line manager or the Chair.

**Missing papers and tabling**

At times you will not receive all of the papers required for the meeting by the deadline. It is important to stay in contact with contributors to determine when late papers are likely to be available. If one or more papers are delayed by less than a day, it may be worth delaying the whole circulation until they have been received, however papers delayed by more than a day should be marked as ‘to follow’ on the agenda and sent out as a second circulation. In such cases it is worth highlighting this to committee members and indicating when the item is likely to be circulated in order to prompt the contributor.

Tabling papers (where papers are circulated at the meeting) should be avoided, wherever possible, as it does not allow members sufficient time to consider the information or proposals being submitted. Late papers received up to half a day before the meeting should generally be circulated (by email, with hard copies available at the meeting) as members may have an opportunity to read them in advance.

**When and how to send out papers**

Generally, papers should be circulated one week before the meeting. This timescale may be slightly longer if external members are attending to allow for postage and possibly less than a week for less formal or more frequent working groups due to the more dynamic nature of their work.

Most committees will have a preferred method of circulating papers either electronically (by email) or in hard copy and judgement should be used about the most appropriate method of circulation based on the number of papers, whether different sizes or colours of paper are used, whether the committee includes external members etc. Generally where there are significant numbers of documents, it is preferable for the Secretary to circulate the papers in hard copy rather than expect individuals to print locally.

If sending hard copies, remember the environment and double-side wherever possible.

If sending papers electronically, ensure that it is clear whether hard copies will be provided and include an environmental message about printing (double-side, more than one page per
You should also consider whether members will have access to colour or outsized printing facilities. Adobe Acrobat Pro can be used to collate multiple documents into a single PDF.

Always make one or two extra copies of the papers in case a spare set is required at the meeting.

Where you think it would be helpful, consider sending a meeting notice electronically to remind people of the meeting confirming:

- the date, time and location
- whether lunch will be provided (where applicable)
- whether there will be any late papers, when they can be expected and how they will be circulated
- confirm any apologies received to date and request that people inform you if they will not be attending

At the meeting

Your primary role at the meeting will be to take the minutes of the meeting. However there are a number of other ways in which you can ensure the smooth running of the meeting.

Remember to take with you

- A4 Paper/notebook
- Minute book (if appropriate)
- Pen(s) – always take at least one spare
- A watch
- Tabled papers
- Spare copies of agenda & papers
- Terms of reference and membership list
- List of apologies
- Responses to items from those unable to attend
- Expenses forms for external members
- If required laptop, iPad, or other electronic device
Before and during the meeting

- Get there early – check you can get into the room, that the refreshments have arrived, open windows/adjust blinds if it’s hot, set up room meeting style if required and check technology if required. Wi-Fi is available in both Whiteknights House committee rooms, level of Wi-Fi access available in other meeting rooms can be checked here http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/crbt/crbt-roombookings/crbt-centrally_booked_rooms_wk.aspx
- Distribute tabled papers.
- Always sit next to the Chair.
- Advise the Chair of any apologies, late arrivals/early leavers and any impact this may have on the order of the agenda, note any additional papers and where they come in the running order, confirm whether anyone is attending for the first or last time and whether the room needs to be vacated by a particular time.
- Make a note of attendees or circulate an attendance sheet – many academic staff have photos on the internal directory if you’re not sure who’s who.
- Keep an eye on the time to ensure that the meeting does not overrun and to ensure that an agenda item is taken by a particular time if a member has to leave.
- If you miss an important point or are unclear about what action the committee has agreed, ask for clarification immediately – this could include confirmation of a decision made, who will take a particular action, when the action should be completed by, to which committee a decision or comment should be reported on to.
- Ensure actions are allocated to individuals in the meeting and a timescale for completion is agreed.
- At the end of the meeting, ask the Chair for any minor points of clarification that were not appropriate to raise during the meeting. It is also worth confirming when you are aiming to have the minutes and report to the Chair in order to check that they can review the documents in time to meet any onward reporting deadline.
- One everyone has left collect any spare papers left behind, close up windows, and switch off lights.

As Secretary you can assist the Chair in ensuring that the business of the meeting is accurately understood and recorded. If you are unclear about anything, for instance a particular point, who will be responsible for an action or which onward committee a decision should be reported to, do not be afraid of asking for clarification during the meeting.

How you take minutes during the meeting is very much down to personal preference but you should ensure that you capture the main points of any discussions, as well as decisions and actions and who they will be completed by.

A minute template can be prepared before the meeting once the agenda has been set and if time allows it is possible to draft sections of the minutes which relate to purely formal business before the meeting to save time.
After the meeting

Timeline for minute and report writing

Following the meeting you will need to write the minutes (or notes if a less formal meeting) and probably produce a report to go to another committee. The urgency of both documents is often determined by the need to report elsewhere and you should ensure that you are aware of onward reporting deadlines and have set aside time to do the work. You should aim to write the minutes and report within a day or two of the meeting and certainly no longer than one week.

Once you have written the minutes you may wish to ask a colleague to read them through for clarity. For more technical committees, for instance those associated with building projects, it is often wise to ask an ‘expert’ to check them before they go to the Chair.

When you are happy with the minutes, these should be sent to the Chair to agree. You may wish to send the report at the same time or wait until the minutes have been agreed and this may depend on how likely it is that there will be revisions to the minutes.

Always give the Chair a deadline for returning the minutes and report (ideally no more than a week) and copy their PA in (if they have one) as they can be invaluable in assisting a prompt response.

Once agreed by the Chair the minutes should be circulated to the committee as soon as possible electronically. The report should be submitted to the secretary of the onward committee.

Tips for good minute writing

An example of a set of minutes is attached as appendix 4.

Style

- be as concise as possible but ensure that you convey a sense of discussions held and record correctly the outcome/recommendation/action. The length of minutes will vary depending on the needs of the individual committee.
- it is unnecessary to record ‘he said… then she said’. If discussion is lengthy summarise the points by using a phrase like ‘The Board discussed the paper at length and the following main points were noted’.
- think about your audience – other members of committee, Freedom of Information considerations?
- write in the past tense and use formal style for minutes
Presentation

- use the University branded report template
- the attendance list should include title, initials, surname and job/office title - individuals should be listed first by seniority of role, where known, and then alphabetically
- indicate the Chair and Secretary in the attendance list
- write a different minute for each agenda item
- refer to the committee as a single entity rather than a group of individuals, for e.g. ‘The Committee noted that …’
- if referring to individual members use their title rather than name, if more than one person with the same title use their Faculty, School or surname to differentiate
- if using acronyms and abbreviations, always state in full at its first usage with the acronym/abbreviation in brackets e.g., 1st use ‘Senior Management Board (SMB) agreed…’ subsequent uses ‘SMB agreed…’
- minute numbering should use the format of calendar year followed by minute number, so 10/01, 10/02 etc and follow on from the previous meeting.
- ensure that the text of a minute is self-contained and does not rely on its heading or another minute to be understood.
- indicate actions in bold so that they can be easily picked out from the body of the text.

Useful terms and phrases

- Committees receive and consider papers and reports, which they note/approve or recommend action on.
- The Committee may formally resolve that something be accepted, may report decisions to another body. Useful phrases are:
  - The Committee received/noted/considered…
  - The Committee approved/endorsed/recommended…
  - Member/It was agreed/noted that…
  - The Board discussed the paper at length and noted in particular the following points…
  - After some/lengthy/detailed discussion…
  - The Committee considered the paper on…
  - There were concerns raised about…
  - The Board approved the report on…
  - It was suggested/recognised/acknowledged that…
- Do not use emotive words such as feel, hope, think etc.

Recording actions

- actions should be recorded in text and the ‘actioner’ indicated in bold so that they can be easily picked out from the body of the text.
- be clear who actions belong to and any agreed deadlines/timescales – you may need to ask for clarification of this during the meeting.
- consider summarising all action points as a bullet point list at the end of the document for ease of reference.
- actions are notified via minutes (or as an extract if the action owner is not a member of the committee) and chased up before next meeting.
- as secretary you may well be allocated actions and these should be completed as soon as possible.
- if the committee proposes the establishment of a Sub-group or Working Party, you may be asked to act as Secretary. Your involvement should be agreed by the Chair and your line manager.
Reports

An example of a report can be found at appendix 5.

A report is a way of committees communicating with each other and may in itself form the business of a parallel or more senior committee. A report is generally shorter than the minutes as it should only include those items that are of relevance to the reporting committee. Although the minutes can be used as a framework for the report, the resulting document should never simply be a ‘copy and paste’ of the minutes. Remember that it may be necessary to expand on certain points in the report in order that the onward committee understands the context but appendices should be kept to a minimum.

Where comment or decision is required by the onward committee this should be clearly articulated in the report. You should also consider whether you need to provide a cover sheet to be submitted with the report.

Committees versus Working Parties

In many respects there is little difference between a committee and working party in terms of organisation. In general a working party is established to look at a specific issue or project and is likely to be required to report within a fixed timeframe. The Secretary will be important in ensuring that this deadline is met. The main differences are:

- Shorter time frames for completion of work
- More actions
- Faster turn around of minutes
- Shorter time frame for sending out agenda and papers and greater use of email for distribution
- Production of interim and/or final report

It is possible that a less formal minute style might be appropriate for a Working Party, but this should be agreed with the Chair.

It is important that you organise your time effectively to meet the compressed timescale, and tips to assist this are to:

- Schedule dates (series of dates if possible) which fit with final report deadline from the outset
- Start drafting the final report as soon as the Working Party starts to reach decisions. It is likely that the last meeting(s) will include a review of the report so you need to account for this when scheduling meetings to meet the report submission deadline.
Freedom of Information and Data Protection

As a Committee Secretary you are responsible for recording the decisions made and actions taken by the University and, as a public body, the University is obliged to comply with legislation in relation to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI), Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR) and the Data Protection Act 1998 (DP). All three are pertinent to committee servicing.

The FOI and EIR gives people the right to request information from the University. The EIR are very similar to FOI, but concern environmental information only. Both pieces of legislation aim to promote a culture of transparency and accountability amongst all public sector bodies, including the University, and therefore facilitate better public understanding of how public authorities carry out their duties, why they make the decisions they do, and how they spend public money.

Under the Data Protection Act 1998, the University must ensure that it collects and uses data fairly and for specified purposes only, stores it safely and does not to disclose it to any other person unlawfully. The requirement for the University to comply with this Act, in protecting the rights and privacy of individuals, imposes certain responsibilities on its staff, students and others that they should fully understand.

The FOI, in particular, is relevant to committee servicing as information relating to a particular subject can be requested at any time under FOI. The University must provide all the relevant information relating to the request that it holds unless an exemption can be applied e.g., the information is personal data or disclosure would prejudice the commercial interests of the University or a third party. As well as formal records and documents in any format, including committee agendas, papers and minutes, relevant information can also include informal email exchanges and handwritten notes taken by the secretary. In short any recorded information that the University holds, including materials held on home computers and portable devices, fall within the scope of FOI (and EIR) and could be disclosed to the public on receipt of a request. Be careful about what you record.

A further requirement of FOI and EIR is that the University should produce and maintain a publication scheme. This scheme acts as a guide to the information the University routinely makes available to the public. Its purpose is to help the public understand what the University does and how it does it. The University does not automatically publish the minutes of all meetings at present other than those included in the publication scheme which include Senate, Court and Council.

Information Management and Policy Services (IMPS) has responsibility for ensuring that the University complies with all three pieces of legislation and can assist in responses to information requests. IMPS have created online training modules regarding DP and FOI which give a greater insight into our responsibilities in relation to the legislation. You are strongly encouraged to complete these if you haven’t already done so. Click here for further details: [http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/TrainingandResources/imps-training.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/TrainingandResources/imps-training.aspx)

The guidance given below in conjunction with the training modules should enable you to assist the University in meeting its legal obligations.

For further information about FOI and DP, visit the IMPS pages here: [http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/imps-index.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/imps-index.aspx)
Summary of top tips

**Before**
- Get organised and diarise time to complete all aspects of committee work from agenda setting through to minutes and report – it takes longer than you think
- Complete the University’s Data Protection and Freedom of Information modules – they don’t take long and are invaluable.
- Find out the reporting lines of the committee(s) you’re looking after and make sure you are aware of deadlines for onward reports
- Get to know your Chair and how they like to work
- If sending papers electronically, Adobe Acrobat Pro allows greater manipulation and editing for PDF documents
- The academic staff pages have photos of staff if you’re not sure what they look like (or who was at the meeting!)
- Remember to book parking/give directions/take an expenses form if there are external members

**During**
- Draw a plan of where everyone is sitting – helps in remembering who’s who, who said what etc.
- Always sit next to the Chair during the meeting
- Take a watch

**After**
- Always use spell check and set up an ‘auto type’ for long names, titles or words that you often mistype – but don’t rely on these tools
- Get your line manager or a colleague to read your minutes, particularly if you’re new to writing them
- Check technical details of minutes with an ‘expert’ before they are sent to the Chair if necessary

**Appendices**
- Appendix 1 Example of agenda
- Appendix 2 Example of matters arising report
- Appendix 3 Example of cover sheet
- Appendix 4 Example of minutes
- Appendix 5 Example of report

Updated 1.12.12