

Comhairle Ceantair Planning - Holding Effective Meetings

Why have meetings?

Regular meetings are essential to how we run the party; they are needed to plan work, share information and for members to get to know each other. However, there are few things as off-putting as attending a badly run, ill-planned meeting that seems to achieve nothing.

If Comhairle Ceantair meetings are like this, essential business will not be carried out in a proper manner and new members will be less likely to stay. It is vital that meetings are well run, properly planned and serve a purpose.

The primary purpose of meetings is two-fold, serving as a means to:

- (a) Make decisions, and**
- (b) Provide information.**

(a) Making decisions includes the following:

- Comhairle Ceantair business: discussing Comhairle Ceantair business (e.g. campaigns and local issues);
- Consultation: forwarding viewpoints to other meetings (e.g. Cuige);
- Constitutional decisions: carrying out business required by the Constitution & Rules (e.g. appointing Comhairle Ceantair Officers and delegates to Ard Fheis).

(b) Providing information includes the following:

- Information: sharing information about what has happened recently or is going to happen around a particular initiative or campaign;
- Education: discussing the latest political developments and learning about politics.

How often should a Comhairle Ceantair meet?

Comhairle Ceantair meetings should take place once a month. However, the benefits of regular tie-in among members and the amount of business the Comhairle Ceantair has to transact means meetings should be held more often where necessary (e.g. fortnightly) but do not have meetings for the sake of them when there is little or no business to be carried out.

Planning the venue

A recurrent theme on the subject of meetings is the issue of where they are held. This issue may not strike members as being of particular importance but there are some issues that should be considered when choosing a venue.

- Are Comhairle Ceantair members happy with the current venue?
- Are prospective members encouraged or put off by the choice of venue?
- Is it conducive to the carrying out of Comhairle Ceantair business i.e. is it quiet, clean, comfortable, ventilated, warm and big enough?
- Are there proper toilet facilities? Facilities for refreshments perhaps?
- Is it accessible safely?
- Is it accessible to people who use wheelchairs?

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- Does the seating ensure everyone can see each other?

The Chair, Secretary or whoever has responsibility for the venue should arrive in advance and ensure it is ready before members arrive.

Planning agendas

Every meeting must have an agenda. This should be prepared in advance by the Chair and the Secretary. The agenda should reflect the time available for a meeting and the relative importance of the various items.

Ideally, agendas should be circulated in advance. Members should also be aware of how to put an item on the agenda rather than rely on the AOB clause.

Consideration should be given to the following:

- How much time should be given to different items?
- Why it is there? (Information, discussion, consultation, decision, or review?)
- Who will introduce the item?
- What items require a detailed discussion?
- What issues need to be decided immediately?

Minutes

Minute taking is a vital exercise in managing the work of a Comhairle Ceantair. They provide a record of plans and decisions made, and as such provide an important reference. They should be brought to the next meeting for approval, and then filed.

What are minutes? Minutes are a brief summary of the following facts:

- The time and date of a meeting, and where it was held;
- The names of all the persons present, and apologies received from absent members;
- Items discussed;
- All actions agreed upon, and who agreed to undertake them;
- Tasks agreed and times for completion, in addition to who will do what.

It is vital that any decisions taken at meetings are recorded, that somebody is given responsibility for carrying them out, and that they are given a timescale. Unless decisions are recorded and followed up at the next meeting, the chances are they won't be put into effect.

Role of the Chairperson

The role of the Chair at a meeting is to ensure it works through the business to be done smoothly and efficiently. The job of Chair is to facilitate, not to dominate. Being Chair isn't a license to talk non-stop for an hour and bore everyone to death. In fact, it's the opposite - it's more important to draw out other people's opinions than to

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express your own.

The Chair should guide the meeting smoothly through the agenda, allowing appropriate (but not too much!) time for each item. Keep the discussion moving and to the point. When a decision is needed on an issue, the Chair should first allow a period of general discussion, during which all viewpoints can be aired and everybody can have their say. After a point, however, the meeting should be steered towards a decision.

The Chairperson is responsible for:

- getting the Comhairle Ceantair through the meeting efficiently and effectively;
- encouraging participation of members in the meeting;
- encouraging all members take responsibility for the smooth running of the meeting.

Beginning the meeting:

- welcome members and introduce any new members;
- ask for apologies received from absent members;
- briefly explain the agenda.

During the meeting the Chairperson should:

- introduce each item;
- keep the discussion in order;
- keep listening;
- keep the discussion moving, and to the point;
- ensure that everyone understands the business, seeks clarification where necessary;
- summarise from time to time, which is helped by taking notes;
- remain alert to signs that members are afraid to speak, bored or frustrated.

Using questions in meetings:

A good way to keep discussion moving and focussed is by using questions:

- Does anyone have experience of this sort of problem?
- Does anyone have ideas about how we could deal with this?
- This is a difficult question, point, issue. How would the rest of you deal with it?
- How did you deal with this in the past?

Ending the discussion of an item

In a timed agenda the Chair can refer to the fact that there won't be time for the rest of the agenda if the discussion doesn't end now. It may be advisable to shorten the time of other items or add on more time to the meeting if members feel it is necessary to continue with the discussion.

Things (some) Chairpersons do that drive people nuts...

- Talk too much;
- Patronise members;
- Over identification i.e. this is my meeting, thank you for coming etc...;
- Unassertive and flippant.

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Things that (some) members do that drive the Chairperson and other members nus:

- not speaking through the Chair;
- not speaking to the point;
- just repeating points previously made;
- not being prepared;
- generalising all the time.

Remember to repeat guidelines where necessary and highlight when they are not adhered to.

Role of the Secretary

A Secretary has responsibility for the administrative work of the Comhairle Ceantair , and thus has a key role to play in the administration of meetings - a process of work that requires the completion of tasks before, during and after meetings:

Before:

- Ensuring that members know in advance the time and venue
- Assisting the Chairperson in planning meetings, including the preparation of an agenda
- Circulating the agenda, and the minutes of the previous meeting.

During:

- Ensuring that the minutes of the previous meeting are approved and signed by the Chairperson
- Taking minutes of the meeting
- Ensuring that meetings are run in a effective and efficient manner.

After:

- Ensuring minutes are typed up as soon as possible
- Filing a copy of the approved minutes

Remember!

- Hold meetings at an accessible location where all members will feel comfortable, e.g. a community centre or the local Sinn Féin office.
- The venue should be suitable for carrying out party business: clean, quiet, comfortable, and warm enough. There should be proper toilet facilities and an effort should be made to ensure the location is wheelchair accessible.
- Meetings should take place at a set date and venue (e.g. every Monday at the Sinn Féin office; the second Wednesday of every month at the community centre).
- Proper notice should be given so that people with family or work commitments can make arrangements to be there. Do not text around 24 hours beforehand to say “we’re having a meeting tomorrow”.
- Try to hold meetings at a time that suits all members, particularly those who may have young children.
- If a meeting is cancelled or put off, let people know. The worst thing you can do to members is waste their time.
- At the start of the meeting, welcome any new members present and introduce them to the Comhairle Ceantair .

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- Meetings should not be too long: between 1 and 1 ½ hours is a good guideline. If meetings are too long attention will wander and people will get bored.
- A Chair needs to plan the meeting beforehand, in particular the time allocated to each section of the clár. This is 10 minutes of work, but it is critically important if the meeting is to be run effectively.
- A Chair needs to be familiar with the business of the Comhairle Ceantair and the party. They should have regular contact with the Secretary. They need to keep up to speed with the work of the Cuige and be aware of updates from National structures.
- Don't allow any individual to dominate the meeting to the exclusion of other members. Ensure all those in attendance treat each other with comradeship or respect.
- Close a meeting in good time before members get restless or bored