

Committee and meeting records – records management guidance

What sort of committee records need to be kept?

Agendas, minutes, notes or reports of meetings, papers or reports presented to the committee, terms of reference, correspondence where committee business is discussed or decisions taken. Most of these records must be kept permanently, particularly the minutes, papers and reports.

What sort of committee records are ephemeral and can be destroyed quickly?

Some committee records are ephemeral and can be destroyed as soon as they have served their purpose. This could mean keeping drafts for a year, if you want to be able to return to the previous year during the current meeting cycle. These include draft minutes, agendas and papers, announcements and notices of meetings, notification of acceptance or apologies, requests for and confirmation of meeting room bookings and catering.

Who needs to keep committee records?

The secretary must keep the main copy of the committee records and ensure that these can be made available to the Records Manager should a request for them be received under the FOIA.

Other committee members, including any post holders, may keep their own copies for as long as they require, but these will not be considered the main copy.

Committee records are regarded as having a permanent value to the School, and so copies will be kept in the School's Archive.

What should be in committee records?

The purpose of Minutes of a committee or sub-committee is to record in a clear and concise form:

- the positions and/or formal recommendations and/or formal decisions which a committee has taken, consistent with its Terms of Reference
- the documentation which the committee had before it to enable it to reach that position and/or recommendation and/or decision,
- as appropriate, the key points in the documentation and in discussion which led to the committee's position/formal recommendation/formal decision.

This does not mean a verbatim account of all the contributions made to a meeting. Committee secretaries will however find it helpful to take detailed notes in the event of a query on the Minutes when they are submitted for approval to the next following meeting of the Committee. These notes could be subject to a Freedom of Information request, though would probably be exempt until the minutes have been agreed. After the minutes are agreed, committee secretaries should then make a decision on whether to keep the notes or not and stick with this decision – keeping to a set retention policy will help should the requester complain to the Information Commissioner.

For Consultative Forums and User Groups summary reports of decisions are compiled rather than minutes. It may however sometimes be appropriate to record discussion at greater length so that the fact of consultation is evident from the resulting document.

How should committee minutes be structured?

Minutes should follow the following structure.

- RECEIVED: a report circulated to or tabled for the committee.
- REPORTED: additional facts (not arguments, views, or opinions) of which the committee was informed
- NOTED: the key points in a report which contributed to a
- position, recommendation, or resolution taken by the committee. Important additional points made in discussion should be recorded anonymously using this heading
- AGREED: a consensus reached by the committee, but not a formal decision; or a further action not within the power of the committee
- RECOMMENDED: a recommendation to a superior body that the committee's terms of reference enable it to make
- RESOLVED: a decision made within a committee's terms of reference.

It is essential that the above key words are used accurately to structure the minutes, because the Minutes often provide the authority for a course of action.

In minuting large items, it is often preferable to break up the Minutes into sub-sections reflecting the main themes of the subject under consideration, with each sub-section following the structure above. Minutes should be given headings and structured in such a way that will enable them to be easily found in future. Minutes dealing with items under Matters Arising from the Minutes should have sub-headings to aid identification. This will also help in identifying which sections are covered by a Freedom of Information request and which sections aren't.

What committee records will need to be made available via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)?

Potentially all records. However, some will be exempt from release. It is worth identifying the items and/or paragraphs of a set of minutes that may need to be covered by an exemption e.g. containing personal information (section 40(2)), commercially confidential information (section 43(2)), where discussion is ongoing or where the item will be recommended to a superior committee (section 36) etc and keeping two sets of minutes – one full set and the other with the confidential items extracted which can then easily be released on request.

You should also consider whether publishing the extracted committee minutes on the website as this could cut down the number of requests received.

If the committee has a very small circulation e.g. to members only, you could instead indicate which minute items and associated papers could be released to a wider audience and who would make up that audience.

What committee records will need to be made available via the Data Protection Act (DPA)?

Occasionally, committees will need to consider personal information, relating to an individual's employment, health or even behaviour. While such discussions would be exempt under FOIA (see above), any such biographical information could be accessed under the Data Protection Act by the individual concerned. For this reason, it is important to consider whether personal information is vital to the record of these meetings.

Given that such discussions will also take place in departmental or even one-on-one meetings, it is important to record only the information relevant to the case in hand. It is recommended that, where possible, formal committee standards should be used to produce all meeting minutes. For example, actions and decisions, not opinions, should be recorded and individuals should not normally be identified unless there is reason to do so.