

# from conflict to co-operation

a handy illustrated guide for community enterprises



## 3 Meetings and decision-making

## Foreword

In order to achieve their goals and be sustainable, community enterprises need to know how to work as a team – communicating effectively, making good decisions, dealing with the inevitable conflicts and coping with growth and change. **‘from conflict to co-operation’** – a series of handy illustrated guides – is invaluable. It includes useful hints and tips as well as signposting to further resources.

The accessible and entertaining content is based on co-operative working concepts and has been written with community enterprises in mind, but it will be useful for any group trying to work together to achieve common goals.

The author, Kate Whittle, has over twenty-five years experience working in and with co-operatives and community enterprises of all kinds, both in the UK and overseas. Angela Martin, the illustrator, is a well-known cartoonist – with experience of illustrating a range of communication and group dynamics guides and handbooks.

I’m sure you will find these booklets a useful and fun resource – enjoy reading them, put their recommendations into practice and harvest the fruits of good teamwork!

**Gillian Bober,**  
**President of the East of England Co-operative Society**

**It is not easy to stand  
up for what is right,  
especially when everyone  
else is afraid to leave  
the comfortable  
path of conformity**

**Michael Moore**



# Introduction

This is the third Booklet in the series '**from conflict to co-operation**'. The series aims to help community enterprises not only deal with conflict when it arises (Booklet 1), but also avoid unnecessary conflict by:

- improving communication (Booklet 2)
- improving meetings and decision-making (Booklet 3)
- managing change caused by organisational growth and development (Booklet 4)
- clarifying the role of the Committee (Booklet 5)

For a democratically-run community enterprise, effective decision-making is a crucial ingredient for success.

Booklet 3 looks at how to improve organisational decision-making. Part 1 focuses on three tools which will help make your meetings more productive and enjoyable, and Part 2 looks at different approaches to decision-making and offers a simple guide to the decision making process.

Why hold meetings? We hold meetings in order to harness the wealth of talent, skills and experience there is to be found within the community enterprise and ensure that those who will be making the products or delivering the services have been able to contribute their thoughts on how best to do it. In this way you can build up a strong team with a shared vision and purpose.

**Each indecision brings its own delays and days are lost lamenting over lost days... What you can do or think you can do, begin it. For boldness has magic, power, and genius in it** **Goethe**



Meetings are the crucial tool for democratic management. Effective meetings result in clear, agreed and delegated decisions to which everyone is committed. They should be reasonably short (not more than 2 hours) and amicable.

Information technology provides a range of approaches for holding meetings including social networking, online forums and phone conferences. The tools and techniques outlined below will be useful guides to effective meetings whatever the approach. You still need to aim at clear, agreed and delegated decisions, even though the approach might be very different. We provide some tips for telephone conferences later on in this booklet.

People sometimes say they don't enjoy meetings, that they are a waste of time, a substitute for "real" work, and boring. Meetings can be a waste of time if they are used purely for information sharing. For example, if a discussion on progress is due, it's best to circulate the progress report beforehand, rather than present it (or table it) at the meeting. In this way your discussions will be informed and less time consuming.

Meetings can also be a waste of time if they are held for decision-making which is better delegated to a sub-group or an individual. In a well-organised community enterprise, decision-making power will be delegated to individuals or sub-groups, since not everyone needs to be involved in every decision. The organisation will need to agree processes and procedures which clearly identify who can take what decisions, and who they are accountable to. We talk about different approaches to decision-making and the decision-making process in Part 2 of this booklet.



Other ways of wasting precious time in meetings:

- poor organisation (uncomfortable venue, lack of refreshments, bad seating arrangements, agenda and papers not circulated in advance)
- ineffective facilitation or inadequate minute-taking (everyone speaking at once, some individuals permitted to dominate all the discussions, confusion over what is being proposed, decisions not taken, decisions not recorded, actions or tasks not allocated, meeting runs over time, no follow up from previous meetings, lack of clarity over who's responsible for actions)

Understanding and perfecting the role of the Chair, taking care with the minutes and proper preparation and use of the agenda will help you avoid these problems. Over time your meetings will become more productive, participants will remain on speaking terms and who knows, you may even end up enjoying them!



**It is our choices... that show  
what we are, far more than  
our abilities**

J K Rowling,  
'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets', 1999

# Part 1 Making meetings more effective

Your meetings will be more effective if you encourage participation, understand the role of the Chair and know how to use the Agenda, Minutes and papers.



## 1. Encouraging participation

A familiar problem for many groups is a lack of participation, or uneven participation, where some people are more vocal than others. It will always be the case that some people are more comfortable or more experienced at voicing their views in a large group, but it is the Chair's responsibility to exercise control over the voluble and to encourage the more reticent.



Booklet 2 lists a variety of techniques for improving and controlling participation in meetings, and perhaps it's worth adding here that the famous "small groups" technique familiar from many training courses is designed to help people participate. For many people, it's easier to contribute in a small group of 5 or 6 than in a larger group of, say, 30, so if it's appropriate and you are looking for high levels of participation in a meeting, then consider using small groups for at least some of the time.

It's not always helpful to draw attention to somebody who has not expressed their views. There may be a variety of reasons why they have not spoken, and people can feel patronised if the Chair assumes they have not spoken through shyness or lack of confidence. It may be that they take time to think things through before expressing an opinion, or it may be that someone else has just voiced very similar views to their own. It's more helpful to use one of the techniques for increasing participation that are described in Booklet 2.

### **Venue and accessibility**

Choice of venue, timing of the meeting, layout of chairs and tables, lighting, heating and availability of refreshments will all impact on the extent to which people will feel empowered to participate. People with responsibility for small children may find it difficult to attend early evening meetings. A meeting upstairs in a pub will exclude not only people with a disability which makes it difficult for them to use the stairs, but also those who do not wish to enter a venue where alcohol is available. Depending on the expected length of the meeting and the time of day, it's usually a good idea to offer tea, coffee, juice and light snacks.

It's helpful to consider the reason for holding the meeting when it is being organised. For example, if it is a meeting of Committee members, and lots of discussion and decision-making is expected, arrange the chairs around a large table, so that everyone can have eye contact and space for their papers, notepads or laptops. If it is a meeting where you are about to explain a new marketing strategy or publicity campaign to employees or volunteers, arrange the chairs in rows so that everyone can see the presentation. For a strategic planning or training day, a 'cabaret style' arrangement works well. Medium sized tables are arranged in a large room, with 5 or 6 chairs at each table, so that people can talk to each other and work together in small groups as well as being able to watch presentations and participate in discussions involving the whole group.

## 2. The Role of the Chair

The role of the Chair is the most critical element for an effective meeting. This role can be best understood by shadowing the current Chair (or acting as vice Chair) since practice is vital.

A good Chair understands that their role is to guide the meeting through the agenda, making sure that sufficient time is allowed for important items and ensuring that the meeting ends on time. The Chair should have reviewed the agenda and prioritised agenda items before the meeting, ensuring that important points are given enough time to be discussed properly.

The Chair is responsible for checking that everyone has the opportunity to speak and that the meeting is not being dominated by one or two members. It is also the responsibility of the Chair to summarise discussions and suggestions, to help the meeting build on them and work towards a decision. We will discuss different decision-making approaches in Part 2.



The Chair is responsible for:

- preparing the agenda, prioritising agenda items and allocating time to each one
- making sure that no one person dominates the meeting and everyone has the chance to speak
- supporting and helping less confident members to get their views across
- building on agreement and moving the discussion along
- clarifying the issues or positions of various parties, before the meeting attempts to come to an agreement
- summarising what has been decided and making sure everyone agrees (this helps the minute-taker)
- allocating tasks, ensuring responsibility for action is clear and recorded
- keeping to time

Although it is the Chair's responsibility to see that these things happen, it is equally the responsibility of everyone present at the meeting to support the Chair in their role.

The Chair and the minute taker should work together – it helps if they are sitting next to one another – to ensure that the minutes are a correct record of decisions taken and action agreed.

It is not a good idea for the Chair to take the minutes! The Chair needs to be looking at the participants, to encourage everyone's participation, which is difficult to manage whilst writing.



### 3. The agenda and papers for the meeting

The agenda is simply a list of items to be addressed during the meeting. Some groups find it useful to allot time slots for each agenda item, ensuring that the important items get most time. Sometimes groups spend hours debating what colour to paint the shed, whilst the budget gets nodded through. Why does this happen? Could it be that some people feel that their knowledge of financial management procedures is lacking, so don't feel qualified to question the Treasurer or Finance Director? This is potentially dangerous for the enterprise, and if this feels familiar, then it is an issue that needs to be raised. It may be that the Treasurer's report is written in language only he or she understands. It's important that participants understand all the reports brought to the meeting, and if financial reports are only comprehensible to the Treasurer, they should be accompanied by graphic representations such as pie charts, bar charts, or graphs. It's the Treasurer's duty to ensure that financial information is accessible to all participants.

...the **H.A.L.T.** method. **Never** make a decision when you are **Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired**

David DeNotaris

It is the responsibility of the Chair to prepare the agenda, perhaps with the support of the Secretary. However, everyone needs to know how to get items on to the agenda. Some groups stick up a piece of paper on the wall or somewhere where everyone will see it, so that everyone can write up their suggestions regarding agenda items.

Agendas often include AOB (Any Other Business) as the last item. If the Chair considers that an AOB item needs more extensive discussion than time permits, they should postpone discussion until the next regular meeting, or if necessary arrange an extra meeting.



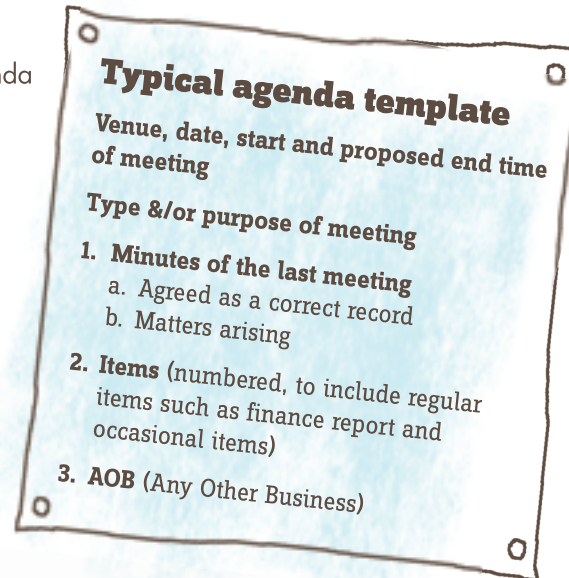
The agenda usually follows a standard format:

- Date, time and venue
- Apologies for absence
- Minutes of the last meeting – are they a correct record?
- Matters arising from the minutes (that aren't already on the agenda)
- Agenda items 1, 2, 3, etc.
- Any other business (AOB)
- Date and time of the next meeting

Some groups find it helpful to indicate whether agenda items are for information, discussion or decision.

## Papers

Ongoing projects, reports from sub-groups, suggestions for new projects or changes in policy or procedures should be written up and circulated along with the agenda and the minutes of the previous meeting in good time for people to read them before the meeting takes place. It is impossible to read a paper and participate in a meeting at the same time! In order for good decisions to be taken, participants need to be informed and to arrive at the meeting having read the papers and formed their own opinions.



## Minutes

The minutes are a record of decisions taken and the names of those responsible for action, including possible target dates. Minutes are a vital tool for continuity and accountability, ensuring that what was agreed can be reviewed and the results assessed at subsequent meetings. This is achieved by checking that the minutes of the previous meeting are a correct record and by reviewing any issues remaining unresolved under the heading "Matters arising". These are unresolved issues which are not already covered by a subsequent agenda item.

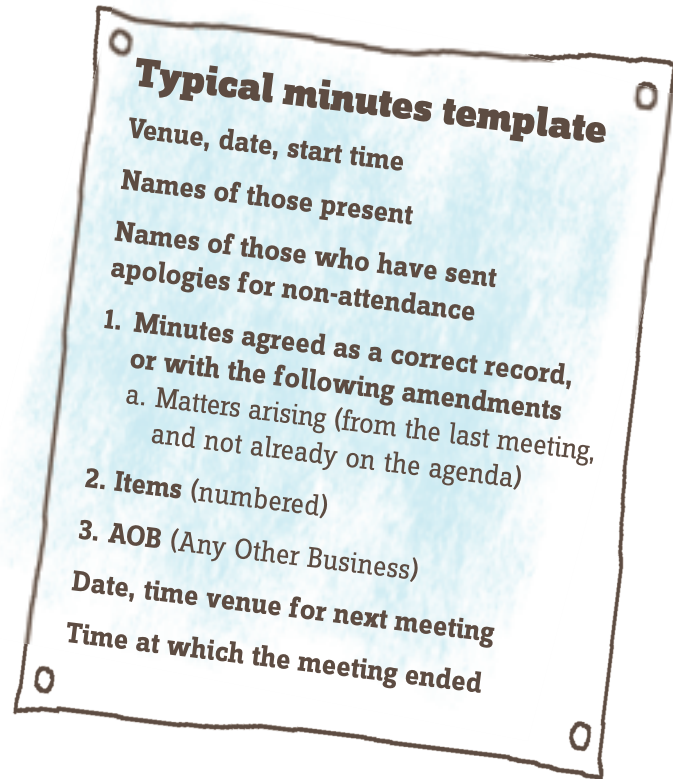


If there is a minority in disagreement with a decision supported by the majority, it can be enough for their disagreement to be recorded in the minutes. If this is not accepted, then it might be best to have a break and return to the discussion once participants have had a few moments to stand back and reconsider. Alternatively, active listening could be used to make sure that minority views have been heard. The Chair's responsibility to end the meeting on time will be a constraint on how long such a process can go on for – as we will see in Part 2, one of the drawbacks of consensus decision-making is that a vocal minority can slow the process down, and the Chair needs to be alert to this.

Actions to be taken as a result of decisions should be clearly recorded in the minutes so they stand out. This helps the Chair to identify any Matters Arising at the start of the next meeting. This can be done in different ways, for example an Action column on the right hand side of the page, with the names of those responsible, or the same information highlighted in the main body of the text, using **Bold**, coloured highlights or Underlining.

Here's a summary of what the minutes should contain:

- date of the meeting
- names of those present
- names of those not present who have sent their apologies
- confirmation that the previous meeting's minutes have been agreed, or any amendments to the previous meeting's minutes
- decisions relating to matters arising from the previous meeting's minutes
- decisions relating to agenda items listed in the order in which they are taken at the meeting
- decisions relating to any other business
- date & time of the next meeting



Minutes should be typed up and circulated to everyone present as soon as possible after the meeting. They can be useful as a reminder of tasks agreed by those present, so are not much help if they do not appear until just before the next meeting.

Like chairing, minute-taking is a skill best acquired by doing it. Rotating responsibility for chairing and minute-taking is a good way to share out the tasks, although these posts should not be rotated too frequently as it takes time to acquire the skills and develop the confidence to perform the role well. It's a good idea to have someone shadowing the minute taker, so if they are unable to attend the meeting, the shadow can take over and thus begin to get a feel for the role.

## Telephone Conference Meetings

During a telephone conference the Chair needs to ensure equal participation by naming individual participants and inviting them to contribute, as it is even easier for talkative or confident people to dominate in a telephone conference. There are a number of websites with helpful hints and tips for successful teleconference meetings, see the Signposting page at the back. But in summary, you should:

- find a quiet place. Background noise can be distracting for other callers;
- avoid using a mobile phone;
- dial in on time (or even a few minutes early). Like late arrival at a meeting it is impolite and implies you think your time is more important than other people's;
- don't put the conference call on hold if your phone has hold music or beeps;
- be aware that cordless phones can produce static background noise when you start to get out of range of the phone base or if you get near other devices such as mobile phones, some small electric appliances and answering machines;

- shuffling papers or tapping pencils etc. can sound very loud on the phone;
- use the mute button with care – i.e. put it on when you are not talking but remember to turn it off again when you wish to speak;
- lastly, the same rules of respect apply as in a face to face meeting – do not speak over another caller, as others will not be able to hear either of you. Be patient; wait your turn and then speak.

Seeds for Change publishes a free and comprehensive selection of guides on running successful meetings, facilitation of meetings and consensus decision making – see the Signposting page.



## Part 2 **Decision-making**

Taking decisions can be fraught with problems in a democratically-run community enterprise. Of course you want to be open and transparent, but if you involve everyone in every decision, you'll never get any work done! The answer is to develop processes and procedures that are agreed and understood by everyone, which clarify who is responsible for different areas of work, and which permit you to delegate authority for decision-making to different teams and individuals. These people are accountable either to the members in their General Meeting, or to the Committee depending on the organisational structure of the enterprise.

Once you have confirmed who has authority to decide what, they should be left to achieve agreed targets in whatever way seems most appropriate to them. It's not a good idea to give someone a task and then be constantly looking over their shoulder to see how they're getting on or suggesting ways in which they might do it better.

**A lot of people don't want to make their OWN decisions. They're too scared. It's much easier to be told what to do**

**Marilyn Manson**



## Different approaches to decision-making

There are four main approaches to decision-making:

1. **Command** means that individuals are responsible for decision-making within a specific role, and for others following their instructions.

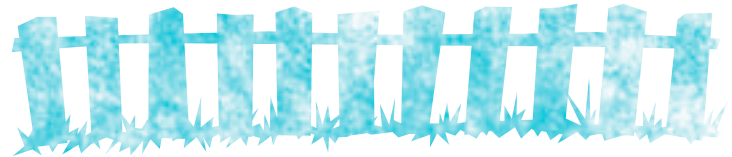
Its advantages are that it can result in quick action, particularly when a deadline is imminent, but it deprives others of the responsibility, opportunity for learning and personal rewards of making decisions themselves. It can also result in inefficiency or bottlenecks if others need to be consulted before action can be taken, or if other people aren't given the opportunity to contribute because they are too far down the hierarchy.

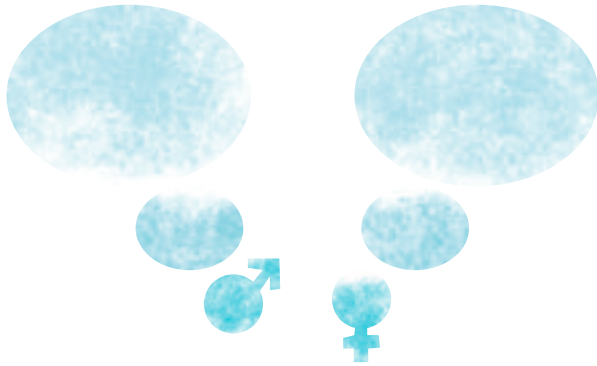
2. **Delegation** means that decision-making is delegated to sub-groups or individuals.

Its advantages are that it can improve efficiency by reducing the number of people required for each decision and it enhances responsibility for consequences by those sub-groups or individuals. However, it does not ensure effective decision-making without clear authority and lines of accountability.

**It doesn't matter which side of the fence you get off... what matters most is getting off. You cannot make progress without making decisions**

Jim Rohn





In true **democracy**  
every **man** and **women**  
is taught to **think** for  
**himself** or **herself**

Mohandas Gandhi

3. **Democracy** means that everyone has a vote and proposals receiving more than half the votes will be implemented. Equal access to information is essential for democracy to work.

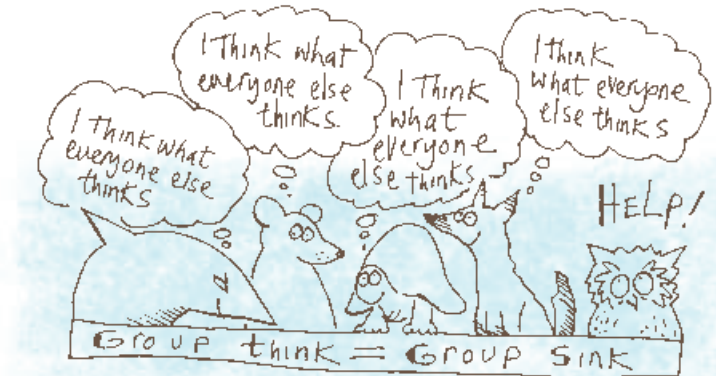
Its advantages are that it can involve large numbers of people in decision-making, it can initiate debate, and a decision is guaranteed, as long as there's a tie-breaker process. However, it is not ideal when the community enterprise needs everyone to implement a decision enthusiastically, since nearly half the participants can end up on the losing side yet be expected to carry out the decision. Voters may also be swayed by apathy, inaccurate information, or the influence of charismatic individuals.

4. **Consensus** means an approach that reflects the ideas and thoughts of all team members, ensuring that decisions are explored thoroughly and strong disagreements resolved. The decision will be one that is acceptable to everyone. It is neither unanimity (the outcome may not be everyone's first choice) nor a majority vote. It requires:

- time
- communication skills including listening, probing, conflict management
- regarding disagreements and conflicts as part of the process
- keeping an open mind and thinking creatively

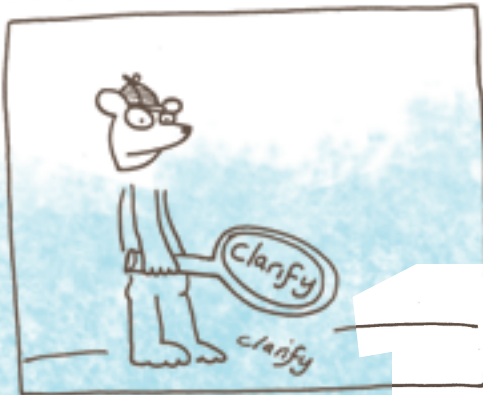
Its advantages are that it maximizes commitment and "buy-in" during decision-making and implementation; it fosters a sense of goodwill that increases patience, flexibility and willingness to participate in damage control; and it encourages discussion of potential obstacles, facilitating the development of alternative solutions.

However, consensus decision-making takes time, and is more appropriate for important decisions (such as those involving the future direction of the enterprise, long-term decisions or decisions involving large sums of money). It may not result in support for any specific course of action, which can be frustrating for those who want to see immediate action. Finally, and most dangerously, it can lead to "groupthink" (a mode of thought whereby individuals unintentionally conform to what they perceive to be the consensus of the group). See the Signposting page for further information on consensus decision-making and groupthink.



## A five-step decision making process

How often do we find ourselves jumping to a conclusion about the best way forward when we have not looked at all the facts, or even clarified that we all agree what the problem is? It helps to begin by clarifying the issue or problem to be solved and then to move on to actually making a decision and implementing a solution. Working through the following steps may help:



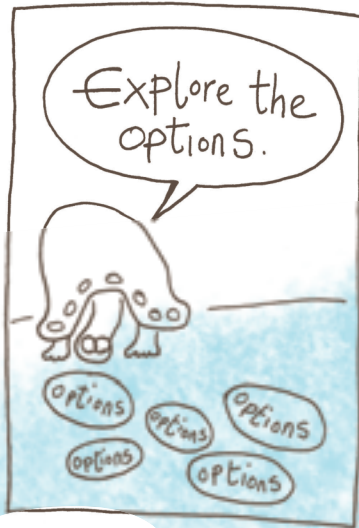
### Clarify the issue or problem to be solved

- what is the issue or problem?
- when and where is it happening?
- who is involved?
- can someone write down a brief description?



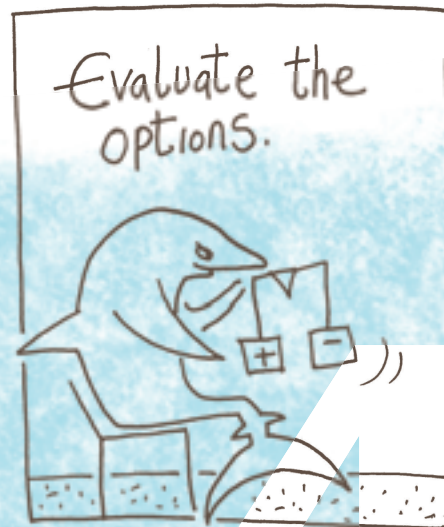
### Collect information

- what might be the causes?
- how can it be measured or assessed?
- are there standards or norms that can be used as guidance?



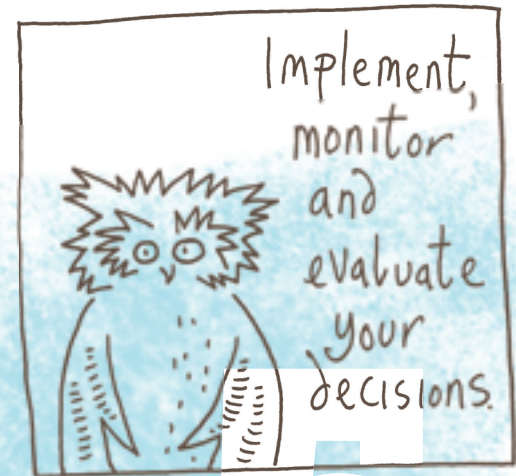
### Explore options

- use brainstorming techniques to generate ideas
- screen the ideas to eliminate the unworkable ones



### Evaluate options

- identify the costs and benefits (or pros and cons) of each option
- identify risks associated with each option
- maybe the way forward is a mixture of different options?



### Implementation, monitoring and evaluation

- finally, implement the chosen option(s), monitor and evaluate progress

## A summary of the decision making process

- Clarify the issue or problem to be solved**
- what is the issue or problem?
  - when and where is it happening?
- Collect information**
- what might be the causes?
  - how can it be measured or assessed?
  - are there standards or norms that can be used as guidance?
- Explore options**
- generate ideas using an 'ideas rainstorm'
  - screen the ideas to eliminate the unworkable ones
- Evaluate options**
- identify the costs and benefits (or pros and cons) of each option
  - identify risks associated with each option
  - maybe the way forward is a mixture of different options?
- Implementation, monitoring and evaluation**
- Finally, implement the chosen option(s), monitor and evaluate progress

Did the chosen option solve the problem? If not, or if only partially, you will have collected information which will help you develop a further option which will be more likely to provide a satisfactory solution.

# Summary

Booklet Three outlined some important steps you can take to improve organisational decision-making. Part 1 focused on three tools to help make your meetings more productive and enjoyable. Part 2 discussed democratic decision-making in a community enterprise, reviewed four different approaches to decision-making, and offered a simple guide to the decision-making process.

## Booklet 4:

### Organisational growth and development

explores the tensions that can arise as an organisation grows, and identifies the tools, techniques and approaches which will help you move from an informal group to a mature organisation, where everyone is committed to organisational goals and understands how the organisation functions and their role within it.

## Signposting

### Websites

to download a pdf copy of this booklet go to:

**[www.fromconflict2co-operation.uk.coop](http://www.fromconflict2co-operation.uk.coop)**

- Telephone conferencing hints & tips:  
**[www.mftrou.com](http://www.mftrou.com)**
- Meetings, facilitation, consensus and more:  
**[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)**
- Meetings:  
**[www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com)**
- Tools for consensus:  
**[www.innatennonviolence.org](http://www.innatennonviolence.org)**
- Meetings, decision-making:  
**[www.cooperantics.co.uk](http://www.cooperantics.co.uk)**
- Symptoms of groupthink:  
**[www.abacon.com/commstudies](http://www.abacon.com/commstudies)**
- Brainstorming technique:  
**[www.businessballs.com](http://www.businessballs.com)**



# www.uk.coop



**Making Local Food Work (MLFW)** is a Big Lottery funded partnership of seven organisations: Co-operatives UK, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Country Markets, FARMA, The Plunkett Foundation, Sustain and the Soil Association. MLFW is rooted in the belief that the needs of consumers, producers and the land are interdependent, and that community enterprise can renew and strengthen these links to the lasting benefit of all.

**Community enterprises** can be organised in a variety of ways – from an informal group getting together to purchase food in bulk, to a professional trading organisation – but they all involve people working together to achieve a common goal. Examples include farmers' markets, community owned pubs and shops, community energy projects and car pools. The way in which activities are organised and decisions made is called governance, and the group of people who come together to organise activity and make longer term decisions is called the Governing Body – or Management Committee or Board of Directors – according to the type of organisation.



ISBN number: 978-0-9549677-5-8

Author: Kate Whittle

Editor: Sarah Alldred

Illustrations: Angela Martin

Design: Wave



**CO-OPERATIVES UK**

Co-operatives UK is the national trade body that campaigns for co-operation and works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. Co-operatives UK aims to bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.