

HOLDING MEETINGS REMOTELY

Many charities may consider holding meetings remotely to manage the restrictions on physical interaction.

While holding meetings remotely may be essential for dealing with restrictions such as those brought on by COVID-19, it can also provide an option for charities in the long term.

Here are some tips and considerations for holding meetings remotely.

Deciding to hold a meeting remotely

Check that holding a meeting remotely is allowed for your charity

Some charities may need to comply with rules that require meetings to be held in person. These rules may be from the charity's own governing document or from a state regulator (such as those for incorporated associations) or ASIC (for companies). Check governing document and check with any relevant regulator.

Check the process for changing rules to allow remote meetings

If your charity's governing rules do not allow it to hold meeting remotely, it may be worth exploring the process for changing the rules. This could be as a temporary measure for situations that require it or as a permanent option if it makes the meeting more accessible for people.

Consult with stakeholders about the proposed remote meeting

Identify who your charity's stakeholders are and put the proposal of a remote meeting to them. This will help identify any issues with the proposal early and allow you to find solutions or make other arrangements.

Be aware of the deadline for holding the meeting

Whether in person or remote, meetings – particularly AGMs – are often subject to deadlines. These may be set by a regulator (such as the state regulator for incorporated associations or ASIC) or by the charity's governing rules. In extraordinary circumstances, such as those brought about by COVID-19, there may be extensions.

Consider the costs involved

Some providers of video conferencing software offer free versions with limited functionality and capabilities. This may be suitable for your charity. However, it may be that your charity needs to spend some money for an effective option. Similarly, there may be extra technology-related costs that may come with a remote meeting – for example, devices, microphones or webcams.

Planning the remote meeting

Providing notice of the meeting

Even a remote meeting requires your charity to provide notice to its members, supporters, stakeholders or whoever is allowed to attend. The notice should be clear about the format of the meeting, the agenda, and how you will manage certain actions in a remote setting – for example, how votes will be taken, how people can ask questions and speak, and how attendance will be recorded.

Ask people to submit questions in advance

Having questions in advance of the meeting can make the whole meeting easier to manage. It is still important to allow questions during the meeting, but for any questions that can be sent ahead of the meeting, it will be helpful to have them.

Select the provider carefully

Take the time to look into the options for a video conferencing provider. Consider the needs of your charity's meeting in doing so – for example, does it need video as well as audio? Does everyone need to be able to speak? Does the session need to be recorded?

Many providers have free options as well as paid services, including some discounts for charities.

Offer help and support

In providing notice of the meeting and its format, it is important to provide a way for people to get help and support joining and then participating in the meeting. This may be having someone on call to be able to help people over the phone or it might be using the help and support that is part of the service provider.

Do a test meeting

Especially if this is the first time holding a meeting remotely, it is important to do a test. This will highlight the difficulties and identify areas in which your charity needs to be more prepared.

Consider the meeting processes

A meeting held remotely still needs to cover all the requirements your charity would cover in a regular in-person meeting. Make sure your charity is clear about:

- how it will record minutes and distribute them
- how it will allow participation from attendees – listening, speaking and voting
- how it will distribute documents during the meeting
- how the ordinary processes of a traditional meeting will work in a remote setting.

Managing a remote meeting

Make the meeting concise

If a remote meeting is a temporary option for an extraordinary circumstance, it may be worth foregoing matters that are not essential. If your charity expects to have a meeting in person again within a reasonable time, other non-essential matters could be covered then.

Keep the regular housekeeping rules

Maintain the housekeeping rules your charity follows for a regular in-person meeting. However, it can be more difficult to manage time remotely, so make sure there is sufficient time allocated for each part of the meeting.

Manage the voting process

Voting on matters will be more difficult in a remote meeting. However, there are a variety of ways your charity can manage this:

- Email during or after the meeting
- Poll or survey using the video conference service or a separate service
- Separate online voting app
- Paper ballot by post

Whichever method your charity chooses, it should be explained to the attendees and absentees, the process should be transparent, and the results should be shared.

There are a number of common apps or software programs available that assist with voting processes.

Manage the questions

For questions that are not submitted in advance, consider how your charity will manage them in real time. There are a variety of ways your charity may approach this:

- Email during the meeting to a central email address
- Chat or message board in the video conference service or via a separate service
- Text messages or phone chat group to a central number
- Audio questions in real time from attendees

Responding to questions is an important part of this consideration too. Consider how the responses will work and whether there is room for broader discussion on the back of the questions. Not all formats will work for this. It is important to be clear about the process and any moderating that goes into it.

Following up on a remote meeting

Establish a way to finalise the meeting minutes

It is important to keep your charity's regular post-meeting processes. Consider how your charity's regular way of finalising a meeting and the minutes and other records or documents will work in a remote setting.

Distribute minutes

Make sure the minutes, records and any other relevant materials are distributed to all who require them in a timely manner. Be clear about the process for this – for example, will it be via email or post?
