

A GUIDE TO ADMINISTERING SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS - CHAIRS

January 2019



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Resources

Supporting papers, including template letters, are referred to in italics and linked throughout this guide. Each secretary will have standard templates for minutes, agendas etc in each individual group folder, as well as additional material saved in the [Group Secretary Resources](#) folder in the SoA Store.

Templates can be adapted where appropriate. Paper copies can be made available to committees on request.

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SoA SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Background and Purpose

The Society of Authors (SoA) aims to support all members, writing in any genre. Historically our special interest groups were founded when there was a particular set of professional concerns that are specific to that area, not met through core SoA activities, and/or there was no external genre group to support them.

The SoA currently has the following Special Interest groups run on a secretariat basis:

**Academic Writers Group (AWG),
Authors North (AN), (events only)
Children's Writers and Illustrators Group (CWIG),
Educational Writers Group (EWG),
Medical Writers (MWG) (dormant),
Poets and Spoken Word Group (PSWG),
Scriptwriters Group (SWG),
Society of Authors in Scotland (SoAiS),
Translators' Association (TA),
Writers as Carers and Society of Authors in Wales (SoAiW)**

For further details see [here](#). There are also regional groups run on a member volunteer basis. They are coordinated by Jo McCrum and Francesca Howell and are not covered in the scope of this document.

Structure

Each group varies in their size and structure and have different aims or constitutions which defines each group. Aims would typically include bringing members together socially and professionally, sharing information on specialist concerns, research, outreach, lobbying and advocacy. Initiatives and events are set by the committees and will reflect their interests.

Constitutions

We now have a standard constitution for all new groups, but some of the older groups have their own constitutions or set of 'aims'. They can be found in the [Group Secretary Resources](#) folder in the SoA Store.

Forming New Groups

The SoA will only form new groups if they fulfil strict criteria, there is a demonstrable need, and we are sure that we can support them. There must be:

- a particular set of professional concerns that are specific to that area, not met through core SoA activities,
- and/or there was no external genre group to support them.
- an identifiable and substantial need, not met elsewhere,

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- fulfilling SoA key strategic priorities.

New groups require the consent of the Chief Executive.

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PERSONNEL

Head of Groups

Jo McCrum is the current Head of Groups and is there to support any group chairs or secretaries with queries that they may have when delivering their group's objectives. She coordinates a monthly group meeting for secretaries to share information, precedents, best practice and ensure core messages are delivered across all groups for consistency and with continuity. Contact [Jo](#) if you wish to contribute or observe the meeting by Skype.

Secretary

The secretary is a member of SoA staff and is chosen by the staff. The secretary is the point of contact between the group committee and SoA staff. Secretaries are there to facilitate their group's wishes and ensure that these are practical, realistic and fit with the overall SoA ambitions. Key tasks will be to schedule meetings, arrange events, coordinate volunteers and manage projects.

Secretaries will have other roles within the SoA and so have limited time to spend on group matters. This is roughly one day a week but can vary subject to project deadlines. A chair should speak to Jo if they have concerns about the time allocated to the group or managing expectations and priorities.

Chair

Group chairs are elected by the committee. Group chairs are extremely important and their relationship with the secretary is key to a successful group. Secretaries should keep in touch with the chair and committee in-between meetings by email, but there should be a closer relationship with the chair who they will be in more regular contact to discuss moving group actions forward. It is advisable to let each other know of any working patterns (e.g. part-time hours, whether the morning is for writing 'admin' calls are preferred in the afternoon) and holidays taken – especially at or near key times (e.g. group events, AGM deadline for nominations). It is between the secretary and chair to arrange the times and method of communication, e.g. monthly update reports or a weekly phone call at busy periods.

Management Committee (MC)

Once the group's membership is over 5% of overall membership, they are entitled to send a representative to the MC. Group representatives, having excellent industry contacts and being experts in their fields, serve a vital role in ensuring a diverse approach, so consultation is meaningful with their views taken into consideration. Group representatives are encouraged to attend MC meetings and can table items for the agenda and speak at meetings. However, as group chairs are not elected by SoA membership, they have no voting rights.

Group chairs will receive all MC papers and will be requested to deliver one yearly report, the timing of which is set at the beginning of the year. Interim reports are provided by either chair or their secretaries for subsequent meetings. Chairs are not

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obliged to attend every meeting - they can delegate to another committee member (or secretary) and we would encourage this (especially those who are interested in standing for MC at the end of their tenure or are interested in being chair).

Each secretary can circulate MC minutes to their committees once they are approved at the following MC meeting.

Resources: [MC Induction Pack](#); [MC Minutes](#).

GROUP MEMBERSHIP

There is no additional charge to SoA members for subscribing to a group and any member with an interest or relevant expertise can join.

[Election of New Members to Groups](#)

Every month, membership sends a list of new members round to the group secretaries. Members can opt to join groups on the initial election form, but this is often missed, so membership will research and add potential recruits. A generic email is sent by the secretary to members saying that they've been subscribed and informing them of the group's interests, campaigns, events, website, Facebook groups and Twitter lists.

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COMMITTEE MEETINGS, MINUTES AND AGENDAS

Setting Meetings

Three to five meetings a year are scheduled according to the requirements of the group. Meetings are usually held at the SoA headquarters for two hours mid-afternoon to coordinate with a members' meeting or to allow committee members time to travel in from the regions. The secretary will schedule a full year's worth of meetings in advance the quarter before the end of year AGM and election of new committee members. Suggested dates will be dependent on boardroom availability and avoiding key events or holiday periods. The Chief Executive, Nicola Solomon, is invited to all meetings.

If committee members are unable to attend the meeting either the chair or secretary should correspond with them on any key points that they would like to raise in-absentia or offer alternative methods of communication - e.g. by Skype, conference call, or FaceTime.

Minutes

In advance of the committee meeting the secretary will begin to deliver/delegate agreed action points as well as draft the minutes of the previous meeting and agenda for the chair's approval. The minutes and agenda are circulated to the committee for approval and alongside any supplementary papers and a call for any other business.

Meetings

It is good practice to for chairs to go through the agenda with the secretary in advance of the meeting to identify and discuss any complex items. It may also be helpful, if the support of the management committee is likely to be invoked, to speak to or remind the secretary to do the same with Chief Executive Nicola Solomon.

On the day:

- Seating is not allocated. The secretary can provide name-cards at meetings with new committee members or guests. After welcoming new members or guests the chair should also ask each person to introduce themselves.
- The secretary will provide spare sets of papers and refreshments.
- The chair will open the meeting logging apologies before going through all the agenda items. It is essential that chairs ensure all members are given an opportunity to speak before moving to the next item. If chairs require or would like training, please speak to Jo.
- Audio recordings are not made of group meetings and there may be times, where there is frank and open dialogue, which may not be minuted.
- The secretary will take minutes whilst contributing to the meeting as a non-voting member but may occasionally halt proceedings to clarify a point for the record.

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- Group chairs or those invited to MC are expected to briefly report back from the MC at each committee meeting. However, if Nicola is attending, she will take on the report.
- Secretaries will report on any internal items likely to be of interest to committee members e.g. unpublished news, campaigns or articles.
- Travel expenses can be reimbursed at the committee meeting from the petty cash tin or by BACS (see below).

After: chairs may, post-meeting, like to invite members to the occasional non-compulsory post-meeting drinks. Either the secretary or chair (or both!) should thank guests for attending.

Special points for Chairs & Secretaries in Relation to Committees and Meetings

Difficult Meetings

There are always going to be disputed areas, but we expect members to express themselves politely and to listen to others. Most unsettled meetings are the result of individuals feeling as if they have not been listened to or even given the opportunity to speak.

Chairs and secretaries should ensure that everyone has a chance to voice an opinion before moving onto the next agenda point. The expression of reservations or negatives (if done politely!) can be helpful at building a better outcome. Consider what the individual is frustrated by and what do they want to achieve – are you unnecessarily blocking their idea (or seeming to)? Have you thoroughly explained any limitations? Has your unsatisfied person been actively involved with a specific task? This can positively re-engage someone who has previously been difficult.

If a committee member continues to be difficult, but not enough to initiate a special resolution to remove them, do raise the issue with your secretary and/or Jo. There are monthly Groups meetings for secretaries where they can discuss what strategies other groups have employed to resolve difficult situations.

Over-Ambitious Aims

Meetings can get too enthusiastic in the heat of the moment or stray into general areas that ought to be passed on to the MC campaigns group. If, as chair, you are no longer sure that something is deliverable, discuss the matter with your secretary before writing to the committee with your reservations and possible solutions. Be aware that some motions, initiatives and expenditure may have to go to Nicola Solomon and the MC for approval.

Resources: [Expenses Policy](#); [Campaigns Brief](#); [MC Protocol for Meetings, Minutes, Agendas and AGM](#), [Outstanding Resolutions and Actions List](#); [Code of Conduct](#); [Dignity and Respect Policy](#).

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ELECTION OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND CHAIR

Committee

The group constitution/aims will determine the number of committee, their tenure, when a meeting is quorate and what is a majority for any special resolution/election (usually 75%). A committee member's tenure is usually three years which expires at the AGM of fixed end-point.

A balanced committee may have eminent authors who will give the group credibility - attract members to events and be called upon for advice and contacts - as well as to emerging authors who are less well-known, but are active and keen. Committees should be mindful to represent of a broad range of skills/genres as well as age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability etc.

Election and Announcements

It is advisable to have a permanent note on the group web-page reminding members that there are regular vacancies and we are interested in committee applications across the year. Alongside this statement should be a short paragraph on what is expected in terms of time and other commitments as well as what skills or interests we may be seeking. The quarter before the group's AGM the Secretary should:

- Ask committee members whether they wish to retire at the end of their term. It may be possible (subject to the group constitution and the agreement of a majority of the committee) to extend a tenure to oversee a specific project.
- It is courteous to ask retirees who they'd personally recommend to replace them (subject to committee approval) - particularly where you may be seeking a similar skill-set/regional representation.
- Approach the committee nominees (this may be done by the chair or another committee member on an informal basis prior to the secretary writing formally with full details)
- coordinate a public call in *The Author* and/or group mailing/newsletter advertising vacancies and encourage members to apply (note: depending on the group's specific constitution nominees may need to submit some or all of the following the month before the AGM: the written support of two members; a biography; an election statement.
- Once the committee nominees and AGM date are in place the secretary will advertise it, announce the committee nominations and remind members that they can stand for election as opposing candidates. Be aware that you might get people standing against the committee choice - this is rare for some groups, but not for others. It is advisable to specify why the committee are seeking any extensions to a committee member's tenure.

Once the election is complete the secretary will make all necessary announcements and issue the new member with an induction pack that consists of: SoA Code of Conduct; Events Code of Practice for SoA Representatives; Equality Policy;

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Expenses Policy; Constitution; Time and Talents Survey; Conflicts of Interest Form and last set of group minutes.

Election of Chair

The chair is elected by the Committee, not the group. The committee should be informed when a chair is due to retire and interested members should make themselves known. The chair/secretary may wish to approach likely candidates to gauge the level of interest. A vote is held if there is more than one interested candidate. A majority vote is over 75%. It is possible to have co-chairs and/or agree split terms of one year each. The chair's term is two years but can be extended if agreed by the committee and where appropriate be announced and ratified at the AGM (if this will involve an extension of their term).

Retirement and Extensions

Committees can get stale - even with excellent contributors, and it's advisable to ensure that there is turnover on the committee and that some members retire each year. Fresh members may have different perspectives that reinvigorate tired campaigns. And one can always ask committee members to return after a rest (when working or family commitments have lessened). Do think about how many people are retiring - five at one go could unbalance your committee. A good retirement rate is 40% each year, but conversely you might have a group that is hard to recruit for, or a particular reason for someone to stay on.

Before coming to an agreement with the committee look at the constitution - it's there to assist the group and will give the terms for extensions, casual vacancies or co-opts. In an exceptional case there's some flexibility because, depending on the context, the committee can request a vote to make an exception at the AGM.

Casual Vacancies and Co-Opting Members Due to Disqualification, Retirement and Death

There will be occasions when someone may die in service or will need to retire early because of ill health or unforeseen family or work commitments.

Depending on the timing and the group constitution the committee can either continue to the AGM or co-opt a new committee member. Co-opted members, when brought in mid-term, do not need to be elected. The number may be limited to the constitution, they do not have full voting rights and their tenure is limited for two years. Replacements for a casual vacancy may be appointed by the committee and will have full voting rights, but their term will expire at the AGM. The co-opted tenure does not count towards their full committee term if they are elected.

Committees may wish to consider inviting a recently retired member, a previously un-elected candidate or a new individual with a specific skills-set.

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Unreliable Committee Members

This can be a sensitive area, so sometimes it is best for the secretary or the chair to pick up the phone if the member is not complying with the Code of Conduct. Is your committee member overwhelmed and on a publicity tour? Had an offer of a paid lecture? Had to attend studio/theatre rehearsals due to a last-minute production request? Undergoing chemo? Or have caring or childcare issues? We must always remember that committee members' time is voluntary and unpaid. Time spent attending, travelling to the SoA and reading papers cuts into an author's working time and we should always be grateful and mindful of that.

Conversely you need stability on the committee and repeated absences can cause others to question their commitment. A light, but firm touch is needed. If someone can't come or finds it difficult – encourage them to attend remotely (Skype, phone, FaceTime) or ask that they engage by responding on major points by email before the meeting (perhaps they have some useful contacts or event ideas?).

You will need to remind your member of the constitution terms and Code of Conduct. They can be removed by the committee after three consecutive no-shows if they have not written apologising with an acceptable reason.

Disqualifying Committee Members

Some tact may be required if a committee member has been diagnosed with a severe or terminal illness and is not responding to emails. In those circumstances it would be best to co-opt a new committee member whilst writing to the member expressing sympathy and informing them that you will not forward committee papers/invite them to meetings until they actively wish to return.

If a committee member does not give adequate justification for their absence following a written warning and non-appearance at three consecutive meetings then the committee can elect to deselect them from the committee.

A similar process takes place for inappropriate behaviour. If the member has not modified their behaviour after a written warning, the secretary or chair should immediately write to the offending member. Their letter will detail that they are putting forward a motion to remove them and warning them not to attend the next meeting or to contact any individual committee members. A further letter (from the secretary) should be sent with the date of the meeting and a request for their defence/written statement as to why they should remain as well as vote. At the next committee meeting (or a special meeting) you can discuss the issue and vote on the situation.

In most circumstances disqualification from the committee does not mean that members are ejected from the group or SoA and the chair or secretary should confirm this.

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Resources: [Code of Conduct](#); [Expenses Policy](#); [Equality Policy](#); [Conflicts of Interest Form](#); [Time and Talents Survey](#); [Events Code of Practice for SoA Representatives](#); [Sample Welcome Letter](#); [How to Be a Strong and Effective Board](#).

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COMMUNICATION WITH MEMBERS

Secretaries are responsible for contributing to the noticeboard section of *The Author*, update their website noticeboards and send out their group events flyers and newsletters. Assistance from the committee on wording for events flyers, news-items, ideas or content for newsletters (blogs, interviews etc) to make them more vibrant is gratefully received.

Group Newsletters

Each group has a specific colour and branding with all registered group members receiving them (unless they specifically opt-out). Newsletters are sent on a regular basis monthly to quarterly depending on the requirements of the group and the secretaries' availability. Publication timings are flexible provided they do not clash with any set SoA or scheduled group mailings (see below). There may be times when groups may like to add an additional mailing or bring one forward if you need to encourage some time sensitive lobbying (and it makes sense to combine the two).

Content is sourced from national press, trade mags, members and social media. Some host a message from the Chair and/or additional content e.g. a feature interview with a group member. All newsletters should carry some highlighted details of main SoA news (taken from the campaigns newsletter or website) and campaigns that need members' support (e.g. writing to MPs when additional lobbying is needed) or a push on SoA events when they need a boost.

Group Facebooks

Secretaries are responsible for monitoring these pages and should, along with the committee, make the occasional contribution by seeding a discussion or posting some useful news. Make committee members aware that it is not a platform for discussing committee business but can be a good place to engage members and research resources; and to report back on initiatives we would like members to support.

To grow pages committee members should be encouraged to nudge known SoA members to the relevant group SoA account by inviting them. This is not compulsory - only if they are comfortable.

Other SoA publications

- **SoA Newsletters** – As of January 2019 there are currently 10,008 subscribers to the All Members List – which is used for the events, campaigns and main newsletter; 1,273 subscribe to the non-member newsletter list. The average open rate for the list across all types of newsletters is 41%. Click rates within newsletters vary, depending on the calls to action, opportunity offered and number and type of links (if lots of information is given then individuals are satisfied and don't click through – whereas teasers encourage more clicks). The top item will always gain more clicks than the ones further down, regardless of topic; and the more links we include in a mailing, the few clicks

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each will get. Our current click rates are at the industry average of 2%, sometimes rising to 14%.

- **Events Newsletter** – this is sent out the first Friday of every month. The contact is Events Manager Sophia Jackson. Sophia will automatically add your group event in the listings after featured highlighted events which tend to be those that have a general appeal. However, with a week’s advance notice, it may be possible to add your event to the highlights if your bookings need a boost.
- **Campaigns Newsletter** – the campaigns newsletter goes out on the second Friday of the month to all SoA members and associates list. The contact is Tim Gallagher. General content is prioritised, but content from groups is welcome. Contributions can be sent until the Monday before publication.
- **General Newsletter** – the third Friday of the month. The contact is Carlotta Eden. This will showcase recently published SOA resources, interviews, blogs etc. Content has to have a wide appeal, but groups are reported upon and special interest will sometimes be the top feature, but usually only when there’s a broader appeal.
- ***The Author*** – published on a quarterly basis with copy delivered around five weeks in advance. The contact is Kate Pool and the editor is James McConnachie. Short contributions are published in ‘Noticeboard’ and are contributed by the group secretary, but full-length articles are considered and paid for.
- **Blogs and Interviews** – these are published on the website and flagged on social media on an ad-hoc basis as approval is given. The contact is Martin Reed. There is no word limit and no payment.
- **Twitter and Instagram** – three tweets a day are scheduled on the general Society account by the communications team. Items/images can be sent by Group Secretaries to Carlotta Eden to be shared or scheduled in advance with general engagement being monitored during events for live or post-event coverage. Each group has a separate Twitter list and they are members are added to these as they join and on request.

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EVENTS

The regularity and nature of these will be decided by the committee bearing in mind SoA resources and the secretary's other obligations. The minimum is one AGM and event but do try to ensure a diversity of both topic and speakers. Chairs and speakers are often drawn from the committee. All speakers, after an acceptance or with thanks after the event, are expected to complete our diversity survey. Either the secretary or chair (or both!) should thank the speakers as soon as possible after an event.

Scheduling: It can be difficult to get members to events outside school terms (unless there is a specific reason or tie-in opportunity); late June-July and the second week of December onwards. Try to avoid religious festivals, the first weekend before University students return and the main book trade or literary festivals e.g. London International Book Fair, Frankfurt, Hay etc or ones specific to your group (e.g. Edinburgh TV festival, Sheffield documentary or children's TV, Ledbury Poetry Festival). At least 4 weeks' notice should be given to members, ideally more. Bespoke reminders can be sent once a month or every three weeks if bookings are low. Additional ad-hoc nudges can be done via social media.

Budgeting: Unless we are promoting a specific area (e.g. building a new group) or have sponsorship we generally would try to at least break even on external expenses. Committee expenses and any necessary accommodation is currently centrally funded as is staff time, SoA resource or office hire. This may change at Bedford Row and/or if funding applications are made. We set the ticket price to the projected audience with, ideally, a small allowance for miscellaneous and unexpected costs. Some events will make a loss, particularly when we try a different format/region, but these losses can then be off-set by tweaking the format and/or running more profitable 'cautious' events. When setting the ticket price bear in mind:

- number of delegates.
- venue and IT costs (the SoA has a database of suitable venues).
- speakers', travel, subsistence and possible accommodation costs. Salaried employees (e.g. producers, publishers and agents) are not given a fee, but it may be appropriate to offer travel costs (e.g. a small independent bookshop or publisher); take them out to supper after the event or give/send them a gift (chocolates, flowers, champagne).
- catering.
- Eventbrite commission.

AGM

AGMs are usually held alongside an event or social to attract members. The timing of the AGM - before or after the event - is up to the committee. Members standing

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for election are encouraged to attend in case there is a vote. A free ticket to the event and travel expenses are paid for those that have been invited to stand. A short report is usually delivered by the chair followed by committee elections (including thanks and welcome). The report is written by the chair and taken from the year's minutes / the chair's annual report to the MC. The report can be circulated by email in advance (with advance questions encouraged) or delivered on the day by the chair. If you would like to limit the time spent on the AGM to members' queries, ratifying decisions, electing committee members and thanking retirees or individuals who have assisted you over the year, it is wise to do the former.

After the AGM the secretary should add any actions or resolutions from the AGM to the agenda of the first committee meeting. The AGM report should be posted to the group page. Reports are not published in *The Author*.

Resources: [Speaker Fees](#); [Template Budget Spreadsheet](#); [Diversity Monitoring Form](#); [Sample Monitoring Survey Request](#); [Expenses Policy](#).

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GROUP COLLABORATIONS AND CROSS-OVER INTERESTS

Each group chair will be briefed on group activities at MC meetings and within their minutes and papers. Otherwise the group secretary is the main point of contact and responsible for forwarding any necessary information.

In the very early planning stages of any event, campaign, interview, blog or article take into consideration where another group may have an interest in your plans and immediately inform them so we can work together effectively. This way we can amplify our promotion of our endeavours, avoid possible conflicts of interest/timing clashes and pool resources by sharing any expertise/administrative burden with other groups. Campaigns with a general interest may be initiated by groups, but then be formally escalated to the MC subsidiary campaigns group who will regularly report back on progress.

It's worth double-checking before you are about to approach a publisher or editor, if the contracts team have had problems with that individual or company. Conversely the secretary should pass on any comments or minuted sections of any members' complaints to the contracts team.

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EXPENSES

The Expenses Policy should be given to committee members as they join and as it is updated. The SoA holds petty cash which secretaries can use to refund members at committee meetings. Invoices and receipts should be sent to the secretary after the meeting with scanned receipts and BACS details (name, bank, sort-code, account number), details of the Group and date of the relevant meeting for approval.

Generally the committee do not have to pay to attend the short evening events they have arranged (tickets under £20), but they are expected to book and pay for the general SoA events. Free or subsidised tickets for longer group events - seminars, day or w/e conferences - are agreed upon on a case by case basis with Nicola Solomon. If committee members are integral to an event (whether attendance or by prior contribution e.g. artwork provided) then the ticket is free and travel (and accommodation if needed) costs are paid.

Committee members are paid to speak or chair our ticketed events, but also our usual fee (and possibly travel/accommodation) is paid if they are speaking on SoA matters at our behest and that external organiser is not known to pay a fee. Be aware that some external conferences e.g. NUT, NAWA are structured so that the majority of speakers are pulled from paying delegates, so they will not offer a fee, travel or accommodation; and will require speakers to pay a delegate rate if they wish to attend sessions outside their lecture. It may not be appropriate for the SoA to subsidise this. Ask if you are unsure.

Resources: [Expenses Policy](#).

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THANKS

Committee members are paid SoA rates when speaking at or chairing full events (with the exception of the Chair's Report), but there may be times when it is appropriate to take them for lunch, supper, send a gift/flowers, (e.g. when they marry, are bereaved etc., doing an event on their birthday etc.) or simply get a round of drinks in after a committee meeting and/or event at a post-social. Any high or unusual expenses are to be cleared with Nicola Solomon in advance.

Jo McCrum, January 2019