

## Local Councils and Community Engagement

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Parish, Town and City (Local) Councils are the tier of local government closest to residents and the work that these councils do directly affect residents' immediate surroundings.

Local councils and their members represent, engage with, provide and maintain amenities and deliver services for the wider community.

There are a number of ways in which Local Councils can communicate with the public and vice versa:

- Public Question Time at meetings
- Publishing agendas and minutes
- Publicising activities through newsletters
- Complaints' procedures
- Opening certain committees to non-council members
- Websites and Social Media
- Consultation
- Participatory Budgeting
- Community led planning

### Meetings and Public Question Time

Under the **Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960**, all local council meetings must be open to the public. This includes meetings of committees at which decisions are made. There may be occasions when there is a need for working parties undertaking background work and research to meet and it is acceptable for this to be done outside of the public domain.

Times, dates and venues of meetings should be notified to the general public through whatever means (notice board, website, etc) at least three clear days prior to the meeting taking place.

Sometimes there is a need for confidential items to be discussed. These include things like employees' terms of service, conduct and engagement, proposals and tenders in negotiating contracts, disputes and legal proceedings.

At meetings which are open to the public, it is good practice to have a period set aside for public questions. It is acceptable for any questions arising at this time to be noted without discussion. Reasons for this are that the subject may be coming up on the agenda, or, if it is not on the agenda, then it is not legal to make a decision on something.

Many councils have a set time for the public session as well as a set time for each person to speak. This keeps the meeting flowing and prevents domination or long speeches.

Attending local council meetings gives members of the community the opportunity to keep abreast of council business, planned activities, how decisions are reached and why, and the way in which councils, as local authorities, work.

Individuals who are not members of the council do not have a right to join in the discussion on agenda items unless invited to do so by the chairman for points of clarification or expertise. It is the council's meeting to which residents are invited to observe.

In addition to regular meetings of the council, at least once each year an Annual Parish or Town Meeting must be held. This meeting, although chaired by the chairman or mayor of the council, is a meeting for residents. It is an opportunity for representatives of community groups in the area to come together to report on what has been happening in the last year and to encourage interest and involvement in projects.

### Publishing agendas and minutes

It is good practice for a local council to make its agendas available to members of the public. This does not mean that a council should be sending them out to all residents (which be costly and time consuming) but rather publishing them in accessible places such as on notice boards and websites. Some councils have very long agendas and many supporting papers which are difficult to put on noticeboards but it is useful for members of the public to find out what is to be discussed at the meetings if it is possible to do this.

Under section 228 of the **Local Government Act 1972**, minutes of proceedings of local councils shall be open to the inspection of any local government elector for the area who may make a copy of or extract from them. The easiest way of making these available is through notice boards and websites.

All local councils should have something called a Publication Scheme. This is a document (often available through council websites where they exist) which outlines the documents that are available to the public as a matter of course and how they can be obtained.

#### **Looking Further**

\* More information on agendas and minutes can be found in guidance sheet 4 – Meetings and Procedures

### Newsletters

Under section 142 of the **Local Government Act 1972** a local council has the power to provide information relating to matters affecting local government. Some councils do this by sending out their own newsletters and many make use of other community and parish newsletters and magazines to publicise their activities. Ways of doing

this are to offer a précis of the most recent minutes, to announce events and consultations, to provide a calendar of meetings and to publish contact details for the clerk to the council and members of the council.

Making these contact details readily available affords members of the public the right of involvement, engagement and communication and displays an openness and willingness by the council for the public's participation and connection.

### Complaints' Procedures

As part of its adopted policies and procedures, a local council should have complaints' procedures. There are standard formats available from a variety of sources.

Complaints' procedures cover complaints about the authority's procedures or administration. There are different avenues for complaints about different issues, such as auditors for financial irregularity, the principal authority's monitoring officer for breaches of the Code of Conduct and the police for criminal activity. Complaints about members of staff should be dealt with by supervision and appraisal and through the council's disciplinary procedures.

Depending on the clauses of individual sets of procedures, usual practice would be for the complaint to be dealt with in the first instance by the clerk to the council. If any response does not resolve the issue, it may be that there is a need for it to go to a council or complaints' committee meeting. It may be helpful to read through other guidance sheets in this series before making a complaint to clarify certain laws and procedures.

### Committees

There are certain functions which a local council chooses to have carried out by a committee or a sub-committee.

Except for in the case of the council's finance committee (the members of which must be members of council which appointed the committee), committees and sub-committees may have members who are not members of the council.

This is particularly useful when working in certain areas of the parish or on certain projects.

There are few situations in which a non-councillor may have a vote on a committee but they may be involved in the discussion and the decision-making process. Non-members may have a vote when it comes to four types of committee – the management of land, harbour functions if the council is a harbour authority, tourism functions and the management of a festival.

Advisory committees need not have any members at all but they would not have a vote in this instance and votes and decisions would be taken by the full council.

Being part of a council committee, particularly when you are interested in the subject and/or have particular knowledge or expertise is an ideal way of participating with the

council. Individuals who take on this role can often act as a conduit between councils as the local authority for the area and community groups.

Local councils are in the unique position of being both influenced by the community and influencing other authorities and stakeholders. This means that if communication channels are as open as possible and participation encouraged, this role is less complicated and more informed.

### Websites and Social Media

Many councils have their own websites or use a local community website to publicise their meetings, events and papers.

By displaying contact details, documents, calendar of meetings and information on the council's services, projects and work on a website a council can vastly widen its audience.

According to the Office of National Statistics; in the year 2013, 73% of adults in the UK accessed the internet on a daily basis. With more and more people working longer hours outside of the area in which they live; for some it is their only means of interaction with what is happening in their communities. This shouldn't mean that it should be the only way of communicating as some people will not use these methods but it should be considered what percentage of the community may now be disenfranchised by not providing these channels.

Use of Twitter and Facebook and other social media sites is a way of reaching members of the community in an immediate and concise way. For people with little time but who still want to know what is happening, this may be preferable than reading full copies of minutes or attending meetings.

Local councils should be considering how to reach all aspects of their community and using these online tools could be a way of doing this.

Use of social networking does require careful management. There are protocols and etiquettes to consider. It should also be considered that if individual councillors are using these techniques they are imparting the council view or, if not, it is absolutely clear that is their own. Once a decision has been made by the council it is up to the individual member to support that decision (even if they did not vote for it). To use social media to express objection to that corporate decision would be considered unprofessional.

As social networking and websites are being used more regularly, it would be appropriate for councils to consider adopting a set of suitable procedures to inform their use.

### Consultation

Consultation is key for local councils when it comes to finding out the wants and needs of residents.

Councillors have been elected by the community to make decisions on its behalf and therefore should be trusted and supported to do just this. This includes decisions on the expenditure of public money on the functions and facilities for which the council has the power, on budgeting, on the hiring and management of staff and on consultations and issues which affect them, the area and local government in general.

There are occasions, however, when it may be prudent for local councils to engage and assemble the views of those that a decision may affect. This may be when there is the potential for a project which is different to the council's usual expenditure, when it is a service or facility that will affect large proportions of and different groups within the area, or when public support will help to substantiate a professed need for something.

There are different ways of consulting the public and it is useful for local councils to consider a variety of techniques in order to gather the views of a wide selection of citizens. These include: convening public meetings, conducting surveys (paper and online), holding surgeries, door knocking, situating suggestion boxes around the area, visiting established groups or having a presence at meetings and events held in the area.

### Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting is a way of including and involving residents of an area in decision making on spending. For local councils, it aims to increase transparency and to encourage more understanding and interest in the affairs of the council

Participatory Budgeting can apply to varying amounts of the council's budget. One way for councils to engage in Participatory Budgeting would be to take a ring-fenced amount of potential grant funding and enter into a process of encouraging residents to prioritise and decide where the money is to be spent. This could be focused around an event where certain community groups put forward a case for why they would like the grant, what it would be used for and what it would mean for the community. This would be followed for those attending the event voting for whichever cause they would like to see receive the funds.

This does require management and it would be suggested that this is pot of money separate to the local council's usual funds. This way, projects and groups really in need will not be forced to compete with others in the same position.

Participatory Budgeting as described above offers the council the opportunity to talk to the community about what powers it has and on what it can spend money and there can be demonstration of where grant funding is already spent. It gives residents a say in where some money is spent and highlights priorities within the area for consideration by the council for future years' funding. It enables councils and residents to actively work together and serves to advance the interest of the public in local issues and citizenship. In addition it raises the profile of community groups, organisations and charities to both the local council and the rest of the community.

More information on Participatory Budgeting can be sourced at <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/>

### Community Led Planning

A Community Led (or parish) Plan often begins and ends with the local council. A decision to undertake a Community Led Plan (CLP) is usually taken by the local council, a community led steering group is then established to work on, devise and produce the plan and then it returns to the local council to be adopted and used as a tool to inform future decisions and projects.

A Community Led Plan is a document which is produced by the community for the community. It is driven by the community from inception to publication and covers all issues of relevance to a particular area.

The plan is produced through research and consultation via a variety of methods as covered in Consultation above. The purpose is to seek out areas of residents' concern as well as to enhance and protect what is of value to the community.

A Community Led Plan will include an action plan which details the priorities of the communities and ways in which these priorities will be dealt with going forward.

In some cases these actions will be undertaken by the local council in partnership with the community, in others they will be used to seek to influence other parties such as the principal authority for the area.

Covering social, economic and environmental issues, a Community Led Plan is the epitome of collaboration and communication between the community and the local council.

#### **Looking Further**

\* More information on local council powers can be found in guidance sheet 3 – Powers and Duties.