



WEST BEDLINGTON
TOWN COUNCIL

West Bedlington Town Council Meeting Protocol

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Introduction

Council meetings are important because this is where the Council (Councillors collectively) make decisions and carries out its business.

This Protocol should be read in conjunction with Section 3 (Meetings) of the councils Standing Orders.

Council meetings are formal events, not social gatherings and have a clear purpose to make decisions. Furthermore, they are public events, the press and public have a right to observe how the council operates, exceptions are when sensitive issues – legal, contractual, or staffing are discussed.

The Council makes its decisions in Council meetings (the whole council) or Committees that must be advertised and open to the public. The council agrees a schedule of meetings for the year but can also agree to hold extraordinary meetings for matters of urgency which must also be advertised and open to the public.

Working groups or “task and finish” groups (usually smaller groups of councillors) are not subject to the strict rules of the council and committee meetings and do not need to be held in public. However, a working group cannot make any decisions on behalf of the council (unless the council has specifically delegated a power to do so). Non-Councillors can be included in working groups (particularly if they have some expertise on a project or in a subject) but they cannot vote. Working groups make recommendations to the full council after they have researched the legality, practicality, and financial costs of any recommendation it presents.

The Town Clerk as an employee of the council can only make specific decisions on behalf of the council if those specific decisions have been formally delegated to them by the council.

The agenda

A successful meeting requires a strong starting point – the meeting agenda. The agenda should be clear and precise about the issue to be discussed and decided upon. The format of the agenda will be determined by The Clerk who will also ensure that all the statutory decisions the Council must undertake are included within a meeting agenda (approval of annual accounts, election of chair etc). All members (not just the Chair) may submit items for inclusion within a meeting agenda to the Clerk in advance of the agenda preparation. Proposals must be submitted in the agreed format and contain as much information as is necessary for Councillors present at the meeting to make an informed decision. Councillors are encouraged to research the legality, practicality, and financial costs of any recommendation in advance of presenting a proposal to the council. Whenever information is missing, or the proposal is unclear it is likely to lead to the proposal being deferred and the meeting time wasted.

The law requires that councillors are summonsed to attend meetings at least 3 (three) clear days before each meeting. The councils own Service Delivery targets states that public meeting agendas should be distributed to councillors 8 (eight) days in advance of the meeting. This is to provide sufficient time for councillors to request clarification or additional information (if available) in relation to any matter included within the agenda. Councillors are encouraged to use the additional time to prepare for the meeting.

Meeting agendas will be made available to the public via the council’s website and notice board no less than 3 (three) days in advance of the meeting.

Attendance

The issue of a summons to attend a council meeting places a duty upon councillors to attend the meeting. However, it is not always possible and other commitments or incidents may prevent a member’s attendance, sometimes at short notice. In those circumstances councillors must contact the clerk and submit an apology

and explanation. Apologies can be submitted to the clerk in advance of the meeting in person, by telephone, text, WhatsApp message or email. Councillors who attend the meeting must sign the meeting attendance register before the beginning of the meeting and must allow sufficient time to do this to ensure the start of the meeting is not delayed.

Participation in an open forum

This Council meets and makes its decisions in public and is committed to community engagement and therefore warmly invites members of the public to attend meetings and contribute within the open forum.

A council meeting is not a public meeting; it is a council meeting held in public and there is no requirement in law to provide an opportunity for the public to question the council, but this council welcomes the opportunity to offer it.

Members of the public are asked to respect the fact that this is a meeting to conduct council business and interruptions during council business are not permitted. If, in the opinion of the Chairman, the business of the meeting is disrupted in any way, the Chairman will ask the person/s causing the disruption to be quiet and if they refuse then ask them to leave. Mobile phones must be switched off during the meeting.

Public participation is permitted regarding items on any topic within the remit of the parish council. Written questions received in advance of the meeting are encouraged but not essential: if provided in advance this will make it easier for an answer to be prepared. The council will not enter into any substantive discussion on a question raised if it is unable to answer a question directly. If members of the public are unsure whether a question is within the remit of the parish council, then the clerk will be able to answer this.

The public will be asked if they have any questions at the beginning of the meeting regarding the upcoming agenda. Public participation will also be for a maximum period of 15 minutes and will take place after the meeting and may or may not be relevant to the agenda. The meeting agenda will always provide the most up to date advise on any further rules and limitations relating to public participation.

Members of the public should note that the council is only allowed to take decisions on topics that are publicised on the agenda, excepting items delegated to the clerk. Agenda items may be suggested no later than 10 (ten) days before each council meeting, otherwise it will be included within a future meeting agenda.

All communication at meetings shall be through the Chairman. Councillors may not address questions raised by members of the public except through and with the permission of the Chairman. Members of the public may not address individual councillors except through, and with the permission of the Chairman. Councillors and members of the public must respect the role of the Chairman and may be asked to leave if in the opinion of the Chairman they breach this protocol in a way that disrupts the orderly conduct of the meeting.

This council will provide an opportunity via the agenda for the police to attend and report to meetings quarterly and respond to any questions or queries from Council.

The Chairman may, at his or her discretion, invite a member of the public to speak on an agenda item during the council meeting if, in the opinion of the Chairman, that individual has relevant information not available to the council which will help in its deliberations.

Recording and filming of meetings

The right to record, film and to broadcast meetings of the Council, and committees is established following the Local Government Audit and Accountability Act 2014. This is in addition to the rights of the press and public to attend such meetings.

Meetings or parts of meetings from which the press and public are excluded may not be filmed or recorded. Questions to the Council from members of the public are not part of the Council meeting and should not be recorded.

Members of the public are permitted to film or record meetings to which they are permitted access in a non-disruptive manner.

The use of digital and social media recording tools, for example Twitter, blogging or audio recording shall be allowed as long as it is carried out in a non-disruptive way and only to the extent that it does not interfere with any person's ability to follow the debate.

The Chairman of the meeting has the authority to stop a meeting and take appropriate action if any person contravenes these principles or is deemed to be recording in a disruptive manner.

Any person or organisation choosing to film, record or broadcast any meeting of the Council is responsible for any claims or other liability from them so doing. Those exercising the rights to film, record and broadcast must respect the rights of other people attending under the Data Protection Act 1998.

The Council asks those recording proceedings not to edit the film or recording in a way that could lead to misinterpretation of the proceedings or infringe the core values of the Council. This includes refraining from editing an image or views expressed in a way that may ridicule or show lack of respect towards those being filmed or recorded.

Those undertaking these activities will be deemed to have accepted these requirements whether they have read them or not.

Whenever the Council records its own meetings, it will provide notice that the Council meeting may be recorded and streamed on the meeting agenda, on the Council's website and also displayed in the meeting venue. Additionally, the Chair of the meeting shall make an oral announcement at the start of each meeting confirming that recording is taking place.

Wherever possible (depending on the venue layout) the Council will endeavour to use a fixed camera location focused only on the Council table, so the public gallery is not filmed. This avoids the GDPR content issues.

However, if ever a venue was used that prevented the desired layout (and members of the public were then in focus of the camera recording) GDPR requires consent. The Council would provide specific notice of this occurring on the meeting agenda, on the Council's website and also displayed in the specific meeting venue. Additionally, the Chair of the meeting shall make a different oral announcement at the start of each meeting confirming that recording is taking place and that by remaining in the meeting after the announcement members of the public have consented to being recorded during the Council meeting.

The Council does not require consent to record councillors and officers acting in an official capacity.

Code of Conduct

Members of the council are bound by a Code of Conduct (Policy 13 Code of Conduct) which sets out the standards of conduct that are expected when they are acting in that capacity, and in so doing providing the openness and accountability necessary to reinforce public confidence in the way in which Members perform those activities.

Members are responsible for ensuring they are aware of and fulfil the obligations placed upon them by any current approved Code of Conduct (Policy 13).

The meeting chairman

The chairman manages the meeting; the office of Chairman is created within legislation and commands respect. The chairman is elected at the annual meeting of the council by their fellow councillors. Chairmen have a duty to ensure that council meetings run smoothly, that all business is properly considered and all councillors who wish to speak can do so, and to make sure the decision is clear for the clerk to act upon.

The chairman is the “interface” between members of the public and councillors at meetings. Other than the use of a second or casting vote when voting is tied the chairman has few special powers. For instance, it is unlawful for a council to delegate decision making to any individual councillor and the chairman is no different.

The Chair has a duty to outlaw disruptive practices, first by warning offenders and then, should behaviour persist, by asking the meeting if they are happy for the Chair to ask the offender to leave.

What does a good chairman do?

Brief themselves and prepare fully – study all relevant information and anticipate the needs and interests of the members. The Chairman can then answer questions or deal with requests for information.

Be punctual – the Chairman should set a good example by arriving early to check the arrangements and welcome members, the public and any visiting speakers.

Conduct the meeting –

Check there is a quorum (minimum number of members needed to make the meeting legal)

Call the meeting to order and declare it open

Welcome members, the public and visiting speakers to the meeting and remind everyone present that under the 2014 Regulations they may be filmed, recorded, photographed or otherwise reported about

Introduce the standard items on the agenda – apologies; declarations of interest; confirmation of minutes of previous meeting etc

Introduce the agenda items and ensure that all members know what they have to achieve and how they might do it and encourage participation

Stimulate an exchange of ideas and experience

Ensure that all have a chance to express their views freely

Keep the members aware of objectives

Maintain focus

Guide and progress discussion towards achieving the objectives

Manage conflict

Be fair and balanced

Preserve order, Enforce rules of procedure, Rule on disputed matters.

Ensure that decision points are adhered to as part of the agenda

Summarise decision taken before moving to the next agenda item.

Councillors' role at meetings

Members should come prepared for the meeting, use the time after receipt of the meeting summons and agenda to read and clarify any of the content.

Be punctual by arriving in good time and signing the register of attendance before the meeting.

Respect the role of the chairman

Observe the code of conduct and display mutual respect for the views of others.

Have an awareness that the meeting is being recorded. Speak loudly enough so that everyone (including members of the public) hears what you are saying.

Those wishing to speak should signal their intention to the chair and wait to be invited to speak. Speak for as short a time as possible without repetition whilst using clear concise language. The chair should take a firm line with people who speak without an invitation, but the Chair will also need to be aware of any difficulty, for example sight or hearing impairment, that may affect a person's perception.

Anyone who attends meetings should be aware of other people's rights to be treated with courtesy. Nobody should be insulted or be verbally attacked by another member. Leave personal opinions outside. Should one member disagree with another, then there is a friendly and courteous way to disagree.

You can drink but no eating should be permitted at meetings.

After the meeting – minutes

The Clerk will prepare a draft copy of the meeting minutes. Minutes are a legal record of the decisions of the meeting not a transcript of the discussions. The councils own Service Delivery targets states draft minutes of meetings will be distributed to Councillors within 3 working days of a meeting and then displayed on the Councils website within 10 days of the meeting.

Councillors are asked to proof read the draft minutes and respond with any alterations to the clerk before they are added to the council's website.

The recording of the meeting may be published on the Council's website and social media channels.

The draft minutes will be included within the next meeting agenda for approval as a true record of the decisions of the council.

Virtual meetings

The Council has a separate protocol in relation to virtual meetings (Policy ref 26 Virtual Meeting Protocol).