

Let them have their say

Stephen Butt

It can seem bewildering to someone not familiar with parish and town councils to discover that members of the public have no legal right to speak at meetings.

Without people, a council would have no purpose and no income. People are encouraged to be active in their community but when and where the decisions are being made and public money is spent, they can only observe.



THE ZOOM EFFECT

Social media has changed how we connect with decision makers, politicians and those with power and influence. Members of Parliament no longer only dictate press releases and wait for the media to consider them for publication at some later date. Today they post a tweet, and within minutes, thousands of people may see it and react.

Thanks to Zoom and other technical innovations, we know what Government ministers look like outside the TV studios, notice the books on their bookshelves and judge whether they have recently been to their hairdresser.

This immediacy, and the illusion that everyone who posts on social media speaks with equal authority, can make local councils seem remote and inaccessible. If it is not on the agenda, it will not be discussed.

Councils had to change their processes in response to the restrictions necessary to deal with COVID-19. Councils have coordinated and supported community initiatives to help those in isolation. Councillors and officers have acted with flexibility and awareness, and as a result, more people have become aware of their council's work and are happy with the way local government is working for them

ALL IN ORDER

Of course, there needs to be formality and structure as laid down in the Local Government Act. Decisions must be based on information, which means research. Forming an opinion requires an open mind, understanding, a knowledge of the subject and the ability to listen to others with conflicting views.

The agenda process enables this to happen. It gives councillors at least three clear days' notice so they have time to think about the business to be discussed, can seek further information or clarity if they need to, and to listen to the views of the electorate.

By the time of the meeting they should be well-informed but willing to listen to comments from fellow councillors and the public before confirming their views. The

agenda also gives members of the public the opportunity to comment on matters that the Council will later discuss, to help councillors in the decision-making process.

MAKE THEM WELCOME

Parishioners should feel welcome and know that their views are respected. As a member of the public, I have attended parish council meetings where no-one has welcomed me or even acknowledged my presence.

- Delegate a councillor or officer to meet and greet. The Clerk and the Chairman are often busy with paperwork before the start of the meeting.
1. Councillors should arrive **before** the public!
 2. Start the meeting with the public session so members can hear comments on agenda items before decisions are made.
 3. Set a time limit. Perhaps no more than 20/30 minutes for the session and no longer than three/five minutes per speaker.
 4. Explain how it works. Include a note at the top of the agenda or have a printed hand-out available to which the chairman can refer.
 5. Draw a clear line at the end of the session, explaining that the public can sit in on the business to be debated but can no longer participate.

6. Remember that the public session is part of the overall meeting. If the meeting did not take place, neither would the public session. So, matters raised must be recorded in the minutes, in general terms. The names of speakers should not be included.
7. If anyone is asked to fill in a form or leave their contact details, remember that GDPR rules apply.
8. Help the public to hear you. Try to arrange the furniture so members can easily turn to face the public.
9. When the meeting closes, thank the public for attending.

Text © Stephen Butt 2020. Images © Stephen Butt or used with permission

www.stephen-butt.co.uk

consult@stephen-butt.co.uk
