

**Public Participation Scheme / Policy
Town Council 15 July 2015**

RECOMMENDED that the Town Council considers whether or not any amendments to the existing public participation scheme are required

Introduction

1. The Town Council currently has a public participation scheme which enables members of the public to speak before the formal start of a Council or Committee meeting. The details are put on the public copies of the agenda (not the Councillor's summons) with the following text.

"The public are welcome to attend this meeting. Members of the public are invited to ask questions or raise issues relevant to the work of the Committee. The overall time available for this session is restricted to 15 minutes unless the Chair decides otherwise. Individual speakers are restricted to 3 minutes and are asked not to repeat points that have been made previously. It is helpful if potential contributors can make themselves known to the Town Clerk before the meeting so that the session can be programmed effectively. This section is not part of the formal meeting of the Council and minutes will not be produced."

2. The scheme was last reviewed by the Town Council at its' meeting on 8 April 2014 when it was resolved that the principles of the Council's public participation scheme were:
 - The public participation slot should be prior to the start of the formal meeting but the meeting Chair has the discretion to allow speaking immediately prior to a relevant agenda item
 - The topics raised during the public participation session should be recorded in the minutes but not the names of individual speakers.
 - Each speaker is allowed 3 minutes and there is a 15 minute total
 - the Chair has discretion to extend the time limits for both speakers and the 15 minutes total.

Background Information

3. It is good practice to provide an opportunity for members of the public to ask a question at Council or Committee meetings and most local authorities and local councils now have a suitable procedure in place; many have extended the opportunity to include making statements. Procedures do vary between organisations but there is usually a specific "slot" and a specified time limit per speaker as well as an overall time limit.
4. It is good practice to review any procedure or policy to ensure it continues to be effective.
5. The Town Council's Public Participation Scheme has operated effectively for many years with no significant problems or complaints.

Possible Areas For Review

The following are some suggestions for issues Councillors may like to discuss, the list is not exhaustive:

- A) The name**
Does the term "participation" suggest that an individual may speak throughout the meeting rather than just the specified public slot? Many schemes refer to "public representations"
- B) The Nature of Public Participation**
Some public participation schemes are limited to asking questions whilst others permit statements to be made or opinions voiced
- C) Participation In Person**
Some schemes only allow people to speak at a meeting, others permit questions or statements to be made in writing and dealt with at the meeting even if the member of the public is not present.
- D) Method of Making Representations**
Some schemes require all representations to be made in writing and received a specified period before the meeting e.g. 3 working days before the meeting;
- E) Who May Participate In The Public Session**
Some schemes limit the people who may participate e.g. to those who live work or study in the area covered by the organisation.
- F) Length of Time**
The length of time allocated to individual speakers varies from scheme to scheme the minimum duration is 2 minutes, there are also schemes when rather than a time limit there is a word limit. In a similar way the overall duration of the public participation session vary 15 or 20 minutes seems the most common length of time.
- G) Policy Guidelines**
Should there be written guidelines available regarding what makes an acceptable representation e.g. the representation must relate to Town Council business or affect the town, the representation must not be defamatory, frivolous or offensive?
- H) Number of Questions / Statements**
Should there be a limit to the number of times an individual may ask a question or make a statement in a given period - some schemes limit a person to making a representation twice a year?
- I) When Should Public Participation Take Place?**
Some schemes only allow participation before the start of the formal meeting whilst others enable the public to speak directly before a relevant agenda item.
- J) Recording Public Participation**
Practice varies across organisations, most town and parish councils seem to record the subject of the participation but not the name of the participant whilst principle authorities record both elements.
- K) Responding to Public Participation**
Again practice varies; the research for this report found examples of only a simple oral response being given at the meeting, detailed written responses being provided and a scheme which states " While your views and comments maybe acknowledged by the Chairman of the meeting, you will not receive detailed "answers" to any points included in your presentation"