

Lacock Parish Council
Public Question Time - Guidance
[Agreed: 10 07 2017*]



1. Public Question Time

The council meets and makes its decisions in public and is committed to community engagement and therefore invites members of the public, the press, the National Trust, the police and district & county councillors to attend meetings and contribute within the public forum.

A council meeting is not a public meeting; it is a meeting held in public and there is no requirement in law to provide an opportunity for the public to question the council, however, this council is pleased to receive input from the residents of its Parish.

2. Reason for this guidance

Public discussion can occur on topics about which people care strongly (which is why they attend), this guidance exists to ensure that the public question time is conducted politely and in a structured and unemotional way that comes to a conclusion in a reasonable time.

3. Guidance

3.1 Commencement: The time for public participation shall be outlined on the agenda. It will usually immediately prior to the council meeting so that councillors may take into account views expressed when reaching decisions. See paragraph 3.10 below regarding representations in respect of planning applications.

3.2 Duration: Public participation will be for a maximum of 30 minutes. It may, very exceptionally, at the discretion of the council, be extended when an exceptionally contentious matter which affects a large number of parishioners has been raised.

3.3 Form of Questions: 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. If questions are not provided in advance then members of the public should be aware that the Chair may be unable to answer those questions and will need to defer that topic to a future date or supply an answer directly to the questioner a few days after the meeting.

3.4 Topics for Questions: Public participation is permitted on any topic within the remit of the parish council but members of the public should be aware that if questions are raised which relate to topics not on the agenda then the matter is more likely to be deferred for a subsequent response as investigation may be required. If members of the public are unsure whether a question is within the remit of the parish council then they are welcome to contact the Clerk prior to the meeting to enquire.

3.5 Provision of Responses: If the question asked relates to a topic on the agenda then the Chair may decide to address it immediately, address it when the appropriate agenda item comes up or carry it forward for a response at a later date at their discretion depending upon a number of factors including: whether more information is required, whether a different form of response may be appropriate or whether insufficient time is available. If a question requires an urgent response then the Chair will do his/her best to answer it at the time.

3.6 Discussion by Councillors of Issues Raised during Public Question Time: Members of the public should note that the council is only allowed to take decisions committing the council on topics that are publicised on the agenda, except where a response is absolutely required prior to the next scheduled meeting of the council. Therefore, the council will not enter into any substantive debate or discussion on any question asked if not related to an agenda item, nor may they reach any decisions within that council meeting.

3.7 Duration of Each Question: A maximum of 3 minutes is permitted for a member of the public to ask a question[s]. This may take the form of one question or two or three more brief questions each of which will be dealt with separately. Timings shall be managed by the Parish Clerk. If members of the public wish for a more detailed dialogue than the 3 minutes allowed, they should contact the Chair or any other councillor for an individual discussion: the parish council meeting is not the correct forum for conducting long debates between councillors and members of the public. Supplementary comments or questions are solely at the discretion of the Chair.

3.8 Role of Chair: All communication shall be through the Chair. Councillors may not address questions raised by members of the public except through or with the permission of the Chair. Members of the public may not address individual councillors except through, and with the permission of the Chair. The Chair's decision on any issue related to public participation is final. Councillors and members of the public must respect the role of the Chair and may be asked to leave if, in the opinion of the Chair, they breach this guidance in a way that disrupts the orderly conduct of the meeting.

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

3.10 Planning application: Any member of the public may address the committee on an application. The 3 minute and other guidance set out above applies to planning matters. Any member wishing to exercise this right is asked to advise the Clerk in advance or failing that immediately before the start of the meeting.

3.11 Other Ways to Ask Questions: Members of the public should be aware that rather than bringing questions to the entire council and other members of the public during public question time, questions may also be addressed, during business hours, to the council via the Clerk.

3.12 Other Points: Members of the public are recommended to make the most of the 3 minutes they are allowed by preparing notes carefully. If several people want to introduce the same question, it would be helpful, where possible, for them to get together in advance to pool their thoughts and to choose the best person to speak for them.

4. Disruption of Council Meeting

Members of the public are asked to respect the fact that council meetings are called to conduct council business and interruptions during council business are not allowed and will not be permitted.

If, in the opinion of the Chair, the business of the meeting is disrupted in any way, the Chair will ask the person/s causing the disruption to desist and if they refuse or persist, will ask them to leave. Should the disruption continue, or if the person/s causing the disruption becomes threatening or aggressive, the Chair will instruct a member of the council to refer the matter to the Police. All mobile phones must also be switched off or at the very least be in silent/vibrate mode during all council meetings. (Please see policy on Reporting and Recording meetings for further detail).

For approval and adoption at the Annual Parish Council Meeting each year as an annex to the Standing Orders.

* Agreed by the Parish Council on 10/07 2017 for their approval and included in the minutes of the Parish Council meeting when this matter was considered.