

House style for agendas and minutes

BINEGAR PARISH COUNCIL

House style for agendas and minutes

1 Introduction

There is guidance about agendas from the *National Association of Local Councils* (NALC) and in the Parish Council's Standing Orders.

NALC stresses that documents like agendas and minutes are part of good communications. They need to be understood by everyone. They are a vital way - one of the few ways - of telling the community what the Council is doing, what decisions are being made on its behalf and involving local people.

NALC's advice includes the following:

"How a parish council communicates with the wider world and how that communication is received and perceived is important because confusion can arise over who is talking to whom, about what, and on whose behalf.

"Individual communication back and forth between council members and the Clerk, if not done appropriately, may create confusion, misunderstanding and, occasionally, even hostility.

"As well as reflecting poorly on the parish council, poor communication may create tensions within the council. This has led to complaints to the Standards Board for England and also employment disputes, many of which may have been avoidable if a few simple rules were in place and agreed.

"Councils sometimes fall into the trap of assuming that routine documentation is only for the benefit of the council or to meet legal requirements. Agenda and minutes may take different styles but should be understood by all. The agenda and minutes are a vital way of telling your community what the council is doing, what decisions are being made on behalf of the residents and involving local people in the life of their community."

"The minutes of a council or committee are a public record of the decisions of the council and great care should be taken in their format and production. The minutes can be produced in court or other judicial processes as evidence of decisions of the council, and they may form part of the Council archives which must be preserved."

2 Agendas

2.1 General standards

- Publish agendas 5-7 clear days in advance of meetings¹
- Email the statutory 'summons' of Councillors to the meeting attaching the agenda
- Format the agenda in the house style
- Prepare a draft agenda in advance of publication to involve the Chair in planning
- Work out a timetable for the meeting so the Chair can give sufficient time to all items
- Have spare copies of the agenda for any members of the public

2.2 Agenda management standards

- Title the agenda page with the Council's name, then
- Head the page clearly "Agenda for the meeting to be held on (date) at (venue) at (time)"
- Number agenda items consecutively

¹ These exclude the day of notice, the day of the meeting, weekends and bank holidays.

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- For clarity, divide the agenda between procedural and business items
- Procedural items include disclosures of interests, previous minutes, apologies for absence, and chair's announcements,
- Chair's announcements can cover public questions, comments or representations, appointments to committees, members' questions when appropriate
- Business items may recur – always include a reference to the previous minute
- Give each item a clear heading that indicates what the agenda item is about and a brief indication of what the Council is going to consider
- Where an item is supported by a report, refer to it on the agenda

3 Minutes

3.1 Objectives

- As brief as is consistent with accuracy
- Precise and concise
- Self-contained (complete in themselves; understood without reference to other documents)
- Decisive (leaving no doubt about the decision made)
- Minutes, not hours!

3.2 General standards

- Produce minutes in the council's house style/format
- Title the first page with the Council's name, then
- Head the page clearly "Minutes of the meeting held on (date) at (venue) at (time)"
- Indicate the start and end times of the meeting
- Start with an alphabetical list (first and family names) of members present (and absentⁱ)
- Number minutes consecutively
- The order of the minutes will normally follow the order of the agenda
- Where the Chair takes items out of order, record this in Chair's remarks

3.3 Standards for each minute

- Give each minute a heading that clearly indicates what it is about
- Give each minute a narrative or text summarising what took place and the decision
- (For routine items, e.g. planning applications, a narrative will not be necessary)
- Write the narrative of the minute in:
 - Reported (or indirect) speech in the past continuous tense
 - Plain English using full sentences and appropriate grammar
 - The narrative should:
 - Make reference to any written reports received
 - Refer to individual speakers by name **only** where this is significant/necessary
 - This may include when a member of the public or district councillor speaks
 - When required, refer to Councillors by first name, use initials in the action column
 - Only summarise the points made in a debate on a sensitive matter
 - This might be done as bullet points (one liners)
 - Avoid abbreviations
 - Use acronyms only after having written the title in full at the first mention

3.4 Standards for decisions

- Highlight decisions (for identification) and the words that show it is a decision, e.g.
 - **Resolved: 1) That. . .**
 - **2) That. . .**
- Include the full wording for decisions
- It is not usually necessary to note mover and seconderⁱⁱ
- It is only necessary to record that a vote was taken where a recorded vote is requested

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3.5 Standards for declarations of interest

- The minute should record clearly:
- The name of the councillor
- The item in which the councillor has an interest
- The nature of the interest
- Whether the interest is (a) disclosable pecuniary or (b) other
- For (a), that the councillor left the meeting for the duration of that debate
- For (b), whether the councillor spoke before withdrawing

3.6 Standards for production, approval and retention of Minutes

- Decisions taken at a meeting have immediate effect (they are not dependent on approval)
- Produce them quickly with a draft for the Chair to check (not rewrite)
- Circulate minutes to members within 10 days of a meeting
- Publish the minutes to the public but mark them draft
- They do not become valid until signed by the Chair at the next meeting
- If changes are made at the next meeting:
- Record the wording in the minutes of that meeting
- Make long-hand changes to the original minutes signed by the Chair and dated
- Retain signed minutes for the archive and a copy for public inspection

3.7 Standards relating to reports

- Some matters require a report to consider all the facts
- These should be distributed with the agenda and published (for transparency)

3.8 Standards relating to exclusion of the public

- Record decisions to exclude the public, make clear to which matter the exclusion applied
- The motion should read:
 - “That in view of the special/confidential nature of the business about to be transacted it is advisable in the public interest that the public be temporarily excluded. . .”
- State the special reasons

Adopted by Council: March 2014
