



Penrith Town Council

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COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

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Introduction

The Council's aim is to communicate clearly and effectively both within the Council and to the public. We will:

- always use the agreed Council style;
- keep sentences short and paragraphs to 3 or 4 sentences;
- use active not passive verbs and sentences;
- use everyday words, avoiding jargon and acronyms;
- keep to plain English;
- always give the Clerk's contact details, e-mail address and website if applicable;
- always use the correct name of the Council;
- Use standard templates for letters, reports and official publications.

What We Communicate

We engage with our various stakeholder groups about the Council's services and facilities. Information is provided and requested on:

- What services the Council provides
- Where and how to access these services
- Changes to these services
- Resolving problems or complaints about these services
- How the Council works
- Who local Councillors are and what their role is
- Where and how the Council can help and support stakeholders
- How stakeholders are or can become involved with the Council's services
- What the Council's policies are
- The Council's principles
- Council events and activities
- Events and activities in Penrith
- How stakeholders can influence the Council's policies, plans and activities
- How to contact Council officers and members
- How to provide feedback and opinions on different Council policies, decisions, and activities
- Who our partners are and how we work with them
- The Council's role in the wider community
- Our successes

Who Communicates?

Responsibility for corporate communications starts at the highest level of the organisation and filters through to all other levels. The Councillors and senior officer team recognise communication as a priority for the Council. They play a role in communicating important information and decisions throughout the organisation, and represent the Council to the public, partners and the media. The Community Engagement Officer has overall responsibility for delivering the communications strategy and provides guidance to the Council to undertake planned

communications activities, to ensure a consistent approach within Council guidelines.

Meetings of the Council And Committees

Agenda

- a. The agenda should be clear and concise.
- b. It should contain sufficient information for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting
- c. Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda. They may contain supporting information such as letters, minutes from other bodies, and so on.
- d. Items for decisions or recommendations will have supporting information such as reports, applications, and letters. These will be published and circulated with the Agenda.
- e. All this documentation will be made available to the public, on the website, if not a Part II paper (exempt).
- f. Agenda for meetings of the Council and its committees will be circulated and made available to the public a minimum of 3 clear days before the day of the meeting. Current best practice is distribution 5 or 7 clear days before the meeting. A clear day does not include the day of the notice or the day of the meeting and excludes weekends and bank holidays.
- g. Spare copies of the agenda should be available for the public attending meetings.
- h. Agenda items will be numbered consecutively for ease of reference.

Agenda - Public Involvement

There is no mechanism for the public to directly place matters onto the Agenda. However, the Council has arrangements for public questions, comments or representations in Public Participation. This is limited to three minutes per person (unless agreed otherwise). The matter may be formally referred to a committee, be placed on the agenda of the next meeting, responded to by the Clerk, or simply noted. There is no discussion at the meeting on a matter for which there has been no prior notice on the agenda.

Agenda - Procedural Items

The agenda for meetings can be divided between procedural items and business items. It is helpful to identify this on the agenda. Procedural items normally include:

Chair's Report - This should be limited to welcome and formal civic announcements, not matters that are or should be on the agenda for debate and decision.

Apologies for absence

Minutes - An item to enable the Chair to authorise the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record. This item is purely for recording corrections and amendments for accuracy purposes, not for raising matters arising from the minutes. See section on Minutes below.

Declarations of Interests and Requests for Dispensations - The Agenda should include standard items in accordance with the latest regulations or guidance concerning Councillor's interests.

Subject to the Council's Standing Orders, custom or practice, there may be other procedural items, by way of receiving information that are not to be the subject of discussion or debate at the meeting. For example:

Appointment of Members to Committees - It may be necessary to change the membership of a committee during the course of a year in the event of a resignation or other reason.

Agenda - Business Items

- a. These will be determined by the Council's activities, or the terms of reference of a committee and its functions.
- b. Some items will recur from previous meetings, and in such cases it is good practice to provide a reference to the previous minutes.
- c. Each matter should be given a clear heading as to what the agenda item is about and a brief indication of what the meeting is going to consider.
- d. More complicated items may require a written report (see below). If there are reports or supporting information this must be clearly identified on the Agenda so that Councillors and the public know to refer to them. The agenda item should refer to the report by its title and other documentation by some suitable reference.
- e. A draft agenda should be prepared in advance of the publication/despatch date and shared with the Chair. The Chair has responsibility for the proper conduct of the meeting and needs to be involved in planning the meeting.
- f. The order of business items is important. For example, it might be appropriate to include controversial items, or items for which there is likely to be public interest and attendance, early in the agenda. Items where the press and public are likely to be excluded should be put at the end.

Reports

- a. Those making the decision must have the full relevant information. Council's decisions can be set aside by a court if due regard has not been given to relevant information or irrelevant considerations have been applied.
- b. The best way of providing this is through a report with accompanying documentation.
- c. Reports may be prepared by the Clerk or other officer, or on occasion by Councillors themselves – especially when reporting back to the Council or committee on an event attended or research done at the Council's request or as a result of a Working Party or Committee meeting action. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision.
- d. Reports and information will be circulated at the same time as the agenda and made available to the public, unless they include confidential matters that would justify the exclusion of the press and public at the meeting. This enhances the transparency of the Council's decision making and improves local knowledge of its activities.
- e. Reports will be in the Council's standard template, and will show the agenda item number clearly at the top for identification.
- f. Even if documentation has been circulated before (either at a previous meeting, or in the run up to a meeting) it should be included again for ease of reference (unless unnecessarily burdensome).

Minutes

The minutes of a Council or committee meeting 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 and other judicial processes as evidence of decisions of the Council. They confirm the resolutions made, and form part of the Council archives which must be preserved.

Minutes should be:

- as brief as is consistent with accuracy;
- precise and concise;
- self-contained (that is: complete in themselves and understandable without reference to other documents);
- decisive (so that there is no doubt about the decision made)

Minutes should not:

- be a verbatim record of the meeting.
- document opinions or views that were expressed at the meeting.

Guidance on Minute Writing

- a. Use plain English using full sentences and appropriate grammar.
- b. Use the house style with a clear heading containing the status of the meeting, the place and date.
- c. Include the time the meeting starts and ends and any adjournments.
- d. Start with an alphabetical list of the Councillors present at the meeting.
- e. Number them consecutively for ease of reference.
- f. Each minute to contain a heading clearly indicating what the minute is about, a narrative or text, as appropriate - that briefly summarises what took place, and the decision. For many routine items, for example, commenting on planning applications, a narrative will not be necessary.
- g. This should be in the past and should include reference to any written reports submitted.
- h. It is not necessary to refer to individual speakers by name unless this is significant.
- i. It may be appropriate to record the fact that an applicant or an objector addressed the Council or committee on a planning application or that the Clerk, other Officer or an Officer of the district or county Council reported on a matter.
- j. Abbreviations should be avoided and acronyms only used after having written the title in full at the first mention.
- k. The decision should be separately highlighted for ease of identification and words used to show that it is a decision, for example; **RESOLVED THAT**
- l. The wording of the decision should be included in full. It is not normally necessary to note the name of the member moving and seconding a motion in the minutes or the fact that a vote was taken (unless a recorded vote is requested).
- m. The order of the minutes will follow the order of the agenda.
- n. Declarations of interest must be carefully recorded in the minutes, naming the Councillor and clearly indicating which item the interest referred to, whether the interest is a personal interest or a personal and prejudicial interest, giving the nature of the interest and whether the member left the meeting during the discussion and decision on the item.
- o. Where Standing Orders provide for the submission by notice of formal written motions to a Council meeting, it is appropriate to record the names of the Councillors proposing and seconding the motion in the minutes.
- p. Where Standing Orders make provision for a recorded vote to be taken, or when a Councillor asks for votes to be recorded in the minutes, the minutes should record the names of Councillors voting for and against the matter or the individual Councillor's vote accordingly.
- q. Where Standing Orders provide for a special procedure (other than routine arrangements) to be followed at a meeting it is generally appropriate to include a reference in the minutes to the procedure being followed as evidence to that effect.
- r. Decisions to exclude the press and public should be fully recorded in the minutes, making it absolutely clear to which matter or part of it the exclusion applied.

- s. Resolutions that are confidential or for some other special reason are not in the public interest to disclose must be recorded in the minutes, without undermining or disclosing the confidential or other sensitive information. For example, the resolution "option 2 in confidential report dated 10 July 2014 reference N PC 3 approved" provides clarity as to the resolution that was made but does not reveal confidential information.

Process

- a. Minutes will be written up as soon as possible so that the minute taker's memory is fresh and interpretation of the information available from handwritten notes of the meeting is easier.
- b. Minutes in draft form should therefore record that fact clearly (at the top and bottom) to the effect: "Minutes subject to approval at the next meeting" or by using a "draft" watermark.
- c. Once prepared they will be submitted to the Chair of the meeting concerned to check. This is an opportunity to pick up any mistakes in the content or identify typing errors, but it is not to be used by the Chair as a means of re-writing the minutes
- d. The draft minutes will then be circulated, within three days to the Chairman and ten clear working days after the meeting, for information only to all Councillors (or where the minutes relate to a meeting of a committee or sub-committee to the members of the committee or sub-committee). This gives Councillors the chance to comment upon minor accuracy issues (spelling and so on) before formal publication of the draft minutes.
- e. The draft minutes will be published (on the website and notice boards), as per the Council's publication schemes, when the summons to Councillors is issued to attend the next relevant meeting.
- f. The draft minutes will be considered at the next meeting for acceptance and signing by the Chair as a true record. If changes are made to the minutes by the Council or committee before acceptance and signing, the wording changes should be recorded in the minutes of the meeting that agreed the changes and the original minutes must be amended to reflect the changes. The copy signed by the Chair will contain the alterations, recorded in longhand, with the changes signed and dated
- g. After the draft minutes are approved, the contemporaneous notes or the recording of the meeting should be destroyed, along with all copies of the draft minutes.
- h. The signed minutes will be retained in the Council's archives. A separate set of signed minutes will be kept for public inspection and for reference at meetings or for other purposes.
- i. Where a matter has been referred by a committee to full Council, by full Council to a committee or by one committee to another, the appropriate part of the draft and full minutes should be passed to the Chair and Clerk of the relevant body by way of notification.

Note - The resolutions made at a meeting have immediate effect. They are not subject to the preparation of draft minutes or the approval of minutes of that meeting at a later meeting.

Communications with the press and public

Minutes and Freedom of Information

- a. Draft minutes are a qualified exemption under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, as they are classed as 'information intended for future publication'.
- b. Therefore, the Council may refuse to provide the information. However there is a duty to consider whether disclosure of the information requested is in the Public Interest. If, for example, a person wants to know whether something concerning them was supported or opposed by a Council and needs this information urgently, then it may not be reasonable in all the circumstances to make the person wait until the approved minutes are available. In any case, the resolutions have already taken effect. In other situations, it will not be in the public interest to withhold information in the handwritten notes, or draft minutes of the meeting.
- c. There are other qualified exemptions in the 2000 Act that enable a Council to refuse to provide information in handwritten notes or draft minutes if disclosure is not in the public interest. If, for example, disclosure would breach one of the statutory data protection principles, the request can be refused.
- d. If the information requested carries an absolute exemption in the 2000 Act, then there is no duty to consider' the public interest. For example, if the information requested concerns information that was provided in confidence, a Council can refuse disclosure.

Press releases

- a. The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chairman of the Council or the Chair of the relevant committee.
- b. Press reports from the Council, its committees or working parties should be from the Clerk or an officer or through the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- c. Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, if asked for comment by the press they should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view.
- d. The press and public are invited to all full Council, and some committee meetings and receive an agenda through the website and public noticeboards
- e. Unless a Councillor is certain that he/she is reporting the view of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.

The Council Notice Board

The Council may identify locations for community noticeboards, seek the relevant permissions and install noticeboards to promote the Councils activities. Agenda are posted on the noticeboard in the Town, website and Council Office reception.

Website

All our agenda, reports and minutes and the Council's Publication Scheme are placed on a dedicated website, with appropriate archive facilities. This will kept up to date on a regular basis. Minutes are sent to Penrith Library for public inspection.

Annual Report

Penrith Town Council produces an Annual Report, which is presented to, and distributed at, the Annual Parish meeting and is available on the website.

Town Council Correspondence

- a. All official correspondence will be from the Town Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letter headed paper.
- b. Responses to correspondence received will be given with ten working days of receipt.
- c. Where correspondence is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (for example copy to XX).

Councillors

Correspondence with external parties

- a. Written correspondence (letters or e-mails) from Councillors to other parties on Council matters should be sent through the Clerk, unless agreed otherwise. The Clerk will make clear that it is written in their official capacity and the Council has authorised it.
- b. A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and the writer should note on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.
- c. Councillors must use their judgement when communicating with others in a personal capacity as to how the correspondence will be received. If there is any risk of the recipient considering that the Councillor is speaking on behalf of the Council, then it Councillor's responsibility to make it clear that they are not.

Communications between councillors and council staff

- a. Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the Council).
- b. No individual Councillor, Chair or otherwise, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee inconsistent or conflicting with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- c. Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Council.
- d. Emails:
 - Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated;
 - All emails from the Clerk will carry the Council logo and include a disclaimer;
 - Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk;
 - E-mails from Councillors to external parties (on Council matters) should be copied to the Clerk;
 - Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so;

- Officers and Councillors are not required to send read receipt acknowledgements of emails.
- e. Meetings with the Clerk or other officers:
- Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
 - Appointments will not be available on the day the agenda is issued or on the day of a full Council meeting;
 - Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer;
 - Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate Council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

Approved: May 2018

Reviewed: Annually