

The Conduct of the Annual Town or Parish Meeting

The Legal Background

- To comply with the Local Government Act 1972, the Parish Annual Meeting must take place between 1 March and 1 June (both inclusive) in each year. The meeting cannot start before 6pm. The Annual Parish Meeting is not the Parish Council's AGM.
- All parish electors are entitled to attend the Parish Meeting and vote. The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 provides for the general public and the press to attend.
- The Chair of the Council (or in his absence the Vice-Chair) must preside if present. If they are not present, the meeting may appoint a Chair for the meeting.
- At least seven days' public notice must be given. Fourteen days' notice must be given if the agenda includes any of the following items:
 - dissolution of the Parish Council;
 - grouping the Parish with another Parish.
- The notice must specify the business to be done. It must be signed by the Chair or any two Parish Councillors or, if necessary, six electors may act as convenors.
- The expenses of the meeting are paid by the Parish Council.
- There are some resolutions of a Parish Meeting that are necessary to, or binding on the Parish Council. These are:
 - that a resolution, by a well attended meeting, requiring the Council to provide allotments places an obligation on it to do so; and
 - that sometimes a trust instrument requires a resolution of the Parish Meeting for some act of the council as trustee.
- Under the Charities Act 1960 the accounts of parochial charities must be laid by the council before the Parish Meeting.
- No method of voting at the meeting is laid down. Any convenient method may be used, but a poll (i.e. a vote of the whole body of electors by ballot) may be claimed before the end of the meeting and must be held if demanded by ten persons present, or one-third of those present (whichever is the less), or if the Chair consents. The poll is conducted by a Returning Officer appointed by the District Council.

Things to Think About

- There is no point publicising a meeting with nothing to discuss, or organising an interesting meeting without proper publicity.
- The aim should be to make the meeting a social occasion as well as a formal occasion and make people feel that they are important in their village or town.

The Agenda

- It is important to frame the agenda so that everyone who has some public standing in the locality has an appointed time when they can tell the meeting what they are doing. The County Councillor and District Councillor should be invited to speak; there should be a report on the activities of the Parish Council; the trustees of local charities should be given their opportunity, as might representatives of bodies such as the village hall committee, the Women's Institute or local sports clubs. This is an excellent opportunity for them to publicise their activities and their friends will be glad to support them. A non-electors may always speak during a meeting with consent. Consent of the meeting should be treated as having been given if there is no objection.

- Accounts which are presented to the meeting should be topical. It is better to exhibit recent unaudited accounts than to produce audited statements which are nearly always a year old and therefore largely irrelevant.
- Outside speakers can be invited. These could be local government officials or experts on matters likely to be of local interest.
- It is useful to include a particular local public issue on the agenda, something important or controversial, e.g. a village plan; planting trees on the green; the expansion of an airport; more houses; water or sewerage schemes; the amalgamation of charities; removal of telephone kiosks and post-offices; bus and train services; commons; clearing the churchyard. On the other hand, it is sensible to restrict the number of controversial issues to be raised at any one meeting.

Publicity

- It is useful to issue a preliminary notice of the meeting about three weeks in advance, inviting local residents to send in resolutions or subjects which they wish to discuss.
- Apart from the statutory publicity, other means include:
 - *The Council Newsletter*. Create a special edition of your newsletter for the occasion or frame the agenda as the newsletter;
 - *Press*. Ask the local press to use the agenda or an item on it as a news item; advertisements in the official notice columns are largely ignored;
 - *Invitations*. Frame the agenda as part of an invitation for Councillors to deliver to each household;
 - *Parish magazines*. Articles on local council affairs and notices of meetings can be put in the parish magazine, or into a *Parish Bulletin* of future events.

On the Night

- Provide refreshments;
- Try to arrange chairs in a deep horseshoe or rectangle so that everyone can see the face of at least half the meeting and recognise speakers;
- Provide an agenda for everyone and a table and agenda for the press;
- The meeting should be as informal as is consistent with order.