



In principle, Parish Councils are legally obligated to allow public access to their meetings under the “Public Bodies (admission to meetings) Act 1960, as amended by the “Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014. This is to ensure that meetings of the council – and its committees - are open to the public and press, unless publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest, due to confidential matters.

The Parish Council must have a demonstrably valid reason, based on the nature of the business, to exclude the public and the Press, who are entitled to attend and report on the meetings. Policies and procedures should be in place to ensure transparency and public awareness.

But, greater than public awareness is the important need for public oversight. This is to ensure transparency, accountability and community engagement in local decision-making, leading, in theory, to better democratic governance and improved quality of life in the parish.

It allows residents to see how the council is spending public money and making decisions, promoting transparency and holding elected and non elected officials accountable for their actions. It should foster a sense of ownership and participation in local affairs, ensuring that the council’s actions reflect the needs and priorities of the community.

When members of the public can scrutinize decisions, on the basis of facts made available, it should encourage councillors to be more thoughtful and consider all perspectives, potentially leading to better outcomes. Public oversight acts as a deterrent against potential misconduct, as councillors will be aware that their actions are being monitored. It is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy,



ensuring that governance remains responsive to the needs and concerns of its residents.

Oversight is to be achieved by open meetings, allowing/encouraging residents to attend and observe the decision-making process, by genuine engagement with Public Consultation on key issues, seeking input from residents before making decisions, by ensuring that residents have the right of access to information about the council's activities. Councils must have established procedures for handling complaints, providing a mechanism for addressing concerns.

It must be remembered that this is in the context that Parish Councils are Legal Entities, truly independent, with the abilities to act as such. They are Corporate Bodies, legally separate from their individual members (councillors). This legal status allows them to own land, enter into contracts and be the subject of legal proceedings. They are accountable to their electorate (residents) and ultimately to the courts.

As the first, or lowest tier of local government, they are statutory bodies, meaning that they are established in law and operate within a framework of legislation. They can raise money through a local tax (precept) and have various powers to spend it.

But, they are NOT under the jurisdiction of their Borough (or District) councils – they are a separate and distinct tier of local government, but do collaborate and interact with each other on certain matters.

It can be seen from this that oversight is vitally important but it operates at the theoretical Level and not in practice. In reality it is unusual to have more than a couple of residents at Full Council Meetings, attendance of residents at Annual Parish Meetings may be less than the number of councillors present and recent responses to consultations were less than 1% of parish electorate. Lack of engagement is resulting in lack of democracy in general but specifically resulted in “no contest elections” in the Bagshot & Lightwater wards at the May 2023 local Parish Council elections.

Key roles in the operation of a Parish Council are the Chair elected annually by members and Clerk to the Council, an employed civil servant.

The primary role of a parish council Chair is leading and managing council meetings, representing the council within the community, acting as a spokesperson and figurehead for the council. At council meetings the Chair acts as presiding officer ensuring conduct in accordance with the Councils “constitution” and procedural rules. They will guide discussions, allowing all members an opportunity to speak and to stay focussed on the agenda whilst maintaining order and ensuring that the meeting runs smoothly. They will facilitate the making of clear resolutions and have a casting vote in the event of a tie.



The Chair will act as the public face of the council, attending events and representing the council's views, fostering community engagement and promoting the councils work by effective communication.

The Chair may have influence but it's important to note that they do NOT have greater authority than other councillors, except for the casting vote –it is NOT an executive role. The Chair works closely with the Parish Clerk who provides administrative and legal support to the council.

The Parish Clerk's role is in support of the council's administration and ensuring it's lawful Operation. Acting as the "Proper Officer" they will be responsible for managing council meetings, handling correspondence and overseeing finances and provide independent, objective and professional advice to the council. Together with the Chair they will ensure that meetings are run according to established rules and procedures, being responsible for implementing the councils decisions, ensuring that actions are taken and followed through.

They may act or have oversight of the Responsible Financial Officer who manages the council's finances, preparing for audits and ensuring compliance with regulations. They will assist in preparing the budget and in maintaining accurate financial records.

They will be responsible for administrative support in general, handling correspondence, providing advice in making informed decisions, responsible for maintaining any properties or facilities.

Key responsibilities will be to ensure that the council operates within the law and relevant regulations, acting as liaison with other authorities and organisations and as a link between council and the community, ensuring the smooth and effective functioning of the Parish Council.

Our Parish Council has operated under the same arrangements since the 1974 Local Government Re-organisation. It effectively resisted, by deviation, the overdue Community Governance Review triggered by the 2019 Petition - to create a fully devolved Windlesham Village Parish Council. The current Borough wide CGR, in preparation for the change to Unitary Authorities is an opportunity to properly review these current arrangements as it's time for change. Expected outcomes of a CGR are improved engagement and its association with improved democracy.

www.windlesham.life

