

A Guide to Committee Meetings County Hall



Devon
County Council



This leaflet explains how the County Council works and how business is conducted at meetings of the County Council or at Committees or Member Groups.

The County Council

The County Council is made up of 62 County Councillors (known as Members) whom you elect every four years. The County Council is the overall policymaking body although a great deal of the detailed work is left to Committees or in some cases smaller groups of members. The Council meets 5 times a year, at County Hall, Exeter.

Meetings of the full Council are held to consider and approve the decisions or recommendations of Committees. The County Council is responsible for setting the overall policy framework and for deciding the level of each year's Council Tax. The Council meeting in February also agrees the budget and sets the Council Tax for the following year. Meetings of the County Council are held in the Council Chamber at County Hall.

The meetings are quite structured with each member having their own seat. A seating plan is available in the public gallery so that you can see who is who. Copies of the agenda and order paper that list the matters to be discussed are available at the meeting.

Committees

The County Council has a Cabinet responsible for the delivery of the council functions in its role as:

- Education Authority
- Social Services Authority
- Highway Authority
- County Planning Authority
- Waste Disposal Authority
- Public Transport Authority
- Traffic Authority

An example of what the Cabinet does would be to get involved in the Council's budgetary process; direct the

Council's economic regeneration activities and address all issues of importance or public concern to the County.

Each Member of the Cabinet has responsibility for certain services and can take decisions on them either as an individual or with the other Members at a formal meeting.

The County Council has also created four Scrutiny Committees with power to investigate policy issues and question Members of the Cabinet, commission reports, invite outside experts to give evidence and make recommendations to the Cabinet and the County Council.

There are a number of other Committees dealing with Development Management, Public Rights of Way, School Transport Appeals, Investment and Pension Fund and Farms Estate.

Every Committee has "terms of reference" which set out its powers and responsibilities - in other words what it can and cannot do. Sometimes it cannot make a decision either because it does not have the power to do so or because it needs the agreement of another Committee. In those cases the decision will have to be confirmed by another Committee or by the Council. Scrutiny Committees do not have what are called "executive powers", rather their job is to advise other Committees who do have power to decide what may be done. You may have noticed that some of the minutes of Committees do not have an asterisk or "star" by the side of them - that means the decision has to be confirmed by the parent Committee and/or Council. All meetings of the Council and Committees are open to the public although in some cases you may be asked to leave when they are discussing certain matters.

Member Groups

These may be appointed to assist Committees in carrying out their tasks, either by discussing issues in detail and/or making recommendations. Member Groups (eg Working Parties or Task Groups) do not have to be open to the public but some are. If the meeting is open to the public, copies of the agenda and supporting papers will be available for inspection before the meeting in the same way as agenda of Committees.

How can I find out when a meeting is to be held?

The County Council is required by law to give a minimum of 5 days' notice of most meetings and allow access to certain types of information.

The dates and times of most of the Committees are shown in the Council's Calendar of Meetings, which is on display at County Hall, Exeter and public libraries. A copy is also available on the Internet (<http://www.devon.gov.uk/dcc/committee/ningifs.html>). Visitors should report to County Hall Reception who will direct you to where the meeting is taking place. The calendar may not include the dates of all such meetings or of working parties/task groups, as some are arranged at short notice, as and when required. If you are interested in a meeting that does not appear on the calendar, please contact the Democratic Services and Scrutiny Secretariat & Members' Services Unit at County Hall (see below).

Copies of agenda and reports of the Cabinet, Scrutiny and main Committees are also published on the County Council's website www.devon.gov.uk.

It is difficult to say how long a meeting will last or when a particular matter will be discussed. If you are interested in a matter that is to be discussed at a meeting it is best to come along for the start of the meeting. That might mean you will have to wait a while to hear the matter in which you are interested but that is better than missing it altogether. As mentioned before there may be occasions when you will have to leave a meeting because something has to be discussed in private - but that and the reasons why will be made clear to you.

Who attends meetings?

Obviously, members of the Committee - whose names are listed on the bottom of the agenda - but who else?

There will also normally be a number of Officers from the relevant service areas whose function it is to advise the Committee. Normally there would be at least one representative from the relevant service for the matter

under discussion and possibly the County Solicitor (to advise on any legal queries). In addition the Committee Secretary will be present to record decisions of the Committee and to advise on matters of procedure and to assist anyone else who attends.

Members normally sit together in their political groups. Seats are normally available at the back of the room for members of the press and the public. Copies of the agenda are also available from the Democratic Services and Scrutiny Secretariat & Members' Services Unit (see below) and will be available at the meeting.

What is an Agenda?

An agenda is like the contents page of a book, it lists the matters to be considered and the order in which they will be taken. Attached to it will be supporting papers that tell you more about many of the items that will be discussed and may offer recommendations. The order can only be altered by the meeting. There is no set time at which a particular item will come up and no time limit on discussion of each item.

Can I get hold of copies of an Agenda?

Yes. Copies of agenda will be available at the meeting - free of charge - and are also available for inspection at County Hall, Exeter or at the main public libraries. Most agenda are also available on the Internet. You can purchase copies of agendas and have them sent to you when they are sent to the Members or we can arrange an email alert to be sent to you free of charge. If you are interested in doing so please contact the Members' Services Unit on Exeter 382888.

What happens at the meeting?

The first part of an agenda follows a standard pattern with Members being asked to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Members can only question the accuracy of the minutes but not raise matters that were discussed previously. The next item is one that enables the Chairman to raise matters that are not included on the agenda - if they are important or urgent enough. It is the Chairman's decision alone.

After dealing with those items the Chairman will move on to the other items on the agenda, dealing with each in turn. At meetings of the Cabinet and Committees, the appropriate Officer will introduce the item and then there will be general discussion on that subject (known as a debate). The Chairman's job is to ensure that there is an orderly discussion and that a decision is taken. A decision may be made on the basis of an Officer's recommendation (as set out in any written report or made at the meeting) or on the basis of a suggestion made by a Member at the meeting. The way in which decisions are taken at meetings often seems complex but as with most things it is not too difficult to understand if you know what is happening. The following paragraphs attempt to explain how things are done.

At Scrutiny Committees, there will be fewer items of business. The Committee will receive presentations from one or more invited "witnesses" (who may be Council officers or outsiders with expertise to contribute). Then Members of the Committee will ask questions on what has been said. Once it has heard all the witnesses, which may take more than one meeting, the Committee will consider what it has heard and decide what recommendations should be made to the Cabinet or Council.

When a Member makes a recommendation (known as a Motion or Proposition) the Chairman will ask Members to debate it. When, in the Chairman's view, there has been sufficient discussion, the Member who moved the motion will be given the chance to speak again. This is known as "replying to the debate". Immediately after that Member has spoken, the Chairman will ask the Members to vote. Any motion must be formally "seconded" by another Member before it can be voted upon. However it is often the case that during a debate on a motion another Member will suggest that it should be altered in some way, perhaps by adding or taking out words (an "amendment"). If this happens the meeting will also have to discuss the amendment. At the end of that debate the member who suggested the amendment will also be given the chance to speak - to "reply to the debate" - followed immediately by the mover of the original motion. Only one amendment can be dealt with at a time. If an amendment is agreed or carried it then becomes a substantive motion (the

original motion is considered to have been defeated) to which further amendments may be made. If the amendment is not agreed then the meeting will vote on the original proposal. There may, of course, then be further amendments. Decisions can be reached by agreement or by a formal show of hands. They are then recorded in the minutes, which go on to the County Council.

Some Members speak more often than others. This is because the political parties on the Council often appoint lead members or “spokespersons” who will take the lead in any discussions at the relevant meeting.

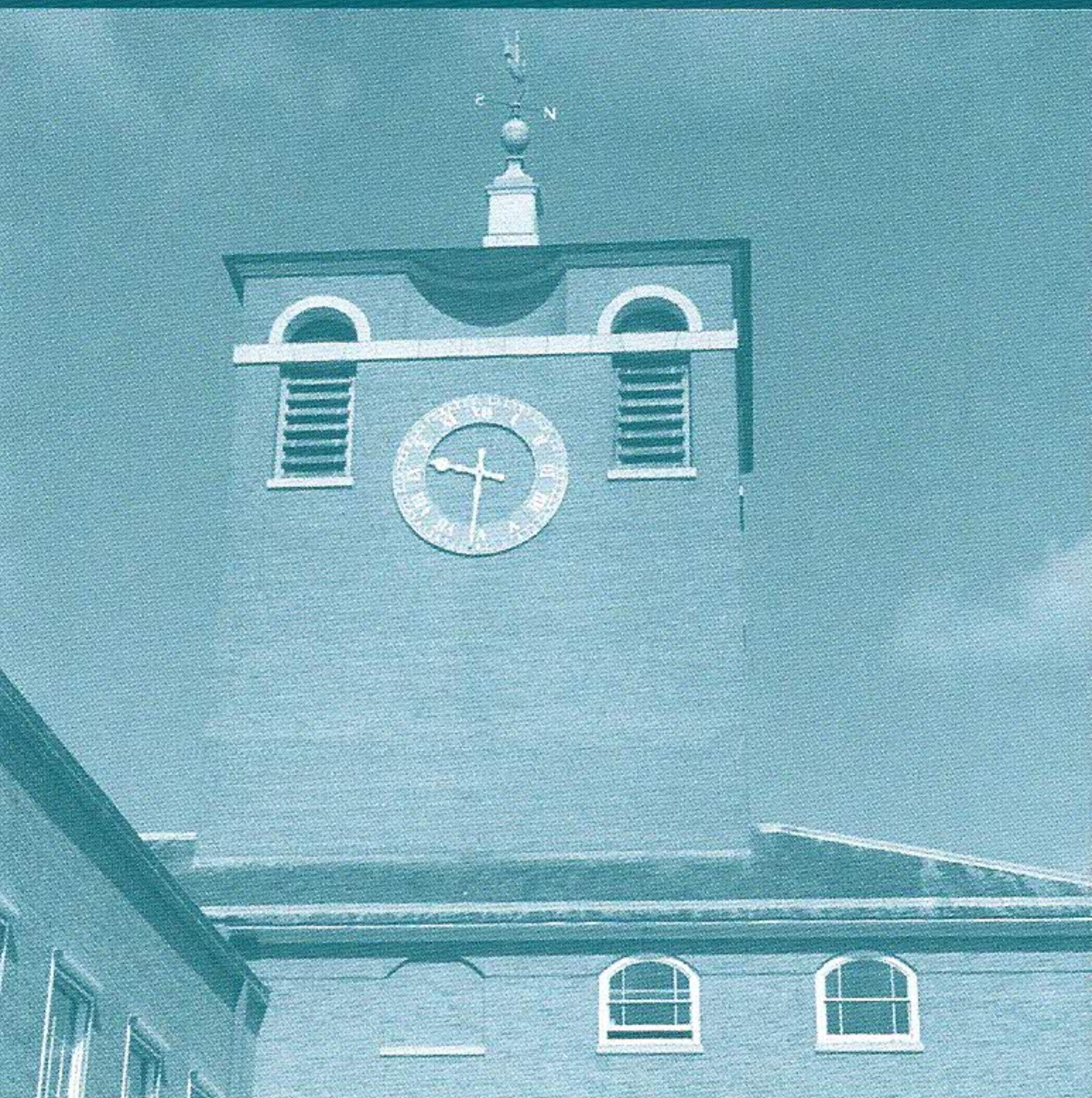
Meetings are conducted according to the Council’s Standing Orders set out in the Constitution, a set of rules and procedures to make sure business is done properly, fairly and in an orderly way.

Can I take part in the meetings?

Normally, no. There is no opportunity for members of the public to speak at or participate in the proceedings of any meeting. If you wish to make your views known on an issue or to raise a particular matter the best way to do that is to lobby your local County Councillor to do so on your behalf.

However, the Council has introduced a scheme to allow members of the public to ask questions or present petitions to the Chairmen of the Cabinet, Development Management, HATOCs, Public Rights of Way and Standards Committees. Details of these schemes are set out in a separate leaflet entitled ‘Having your Say’ which also includes a link to our petitions scheme.

In addition, many proposals under consideration by the Council are the subject of public consultation and are publicised through press adverts, street notices, exhibitions, the internet etc. You can often use pre-paid forms to respond or you can write in or send your views via email.



Further Information

If you would like any more information, please contact the Democratic Services & Scrutiny Secretariat & Members' Services Unit in the office of the County Solicitor at County Hall, Exeter, EX2 4QD

Tel: Exeter 382300 or e-mail committee@devon.gov.uk

County Hall, Topsham Road, Exeter, Devon EX2 4QD

www.devon.gov.uk

Produced by the Democratic Services & Scrutiny Secretariat & Members' Services Unit

June 2011