



DARTMOUTH

TOWN COUNCIL

Public Participation Policy

Approved at Finance & General Purposes Committee 18th September 2023

Introduction

Members of the public have a legal right to attend decision making meetings of Dartmouth Town Council (DTC) and its committees, except where they are excluded for specific items which need to be discussed in confidence, for example staffing matters or tenders for contracts.

Members of the public have no legal right to speak at meetings of DTC and its committees and so when they are allowed to do so it is considered a privilege. DTC sets aside time for public participation at Full Council meetings during which members of the public may make a representation, contribution, suggestion or ask a question. Members with a prejudicial interest in an agenda item may speak during public participation (and then leave the room when the item is considered).

Other than when invited to do so by the Chair, members of the public are not permitted to speak at the meeting as this confuses the roles of members, who participate in the meeting, and members of the public who observe it. If there is a possibility that a large number of people will wish to speak, the Chair will encourage people not to repeat comments made by earlier speakers or ask for a single representative to be appointed.

Public participation takes place near the start of the meeting immediately after declaration of interests to make everyone aware if a member has a prejudicial interest. The time for public participation shall be outlined on the agenda.

It is recognised that some members of the public may abuse the opportunity to speak. While the Chair will endeavour to ensure an answer to a question, this may be refused if continuous representations are made or repetitive questions asked. Neither members nor officials are under any obligation to respond immediately or at all to comments or questions made during public participation.

The Chair's decision to allow a question or require an answer to be given will be final. Members of the public do not have a right to force items onto the council agenda. The public have a legal right to attend council and committee meetings but do not have a right to disrupt them. Members of the public should not heckle or otherwise disrupt and must respect the rulings of the Chair. As per DTC's

Standing Orders, if person(s) disregard the request of the chair of the meeting to moderate or improve their conduct, any member or the chair of the meeting may move that the person be no longer heard or be excluded from the meeting. The motion, if seconded, shall be put to the vote without discussion.

Rules

A maximum of fifteen minutes will be set aside for public participation at a Full Council meeting. Each member of the public may speak for no more than three minutes.

Public Meeting Act 1908

The conduct of public participation will be regulated by the Chair having regard to the guidelines set out but with the right of discretion reserved. An extension of this time limit is at the sole discretion of the Chair.

The Chair's decision on the relevance of a representation or question and on the method of dealing with any issue in connection with this procedure will be final. This includes the Chair's decision to allow a representation or question or require an answer to be given.

Questions must be clear and concise and be relevant to matters for which DTC has powers or duties. Questions, representations, contributions or suggestions should not:

- Contain offensive expressions or be personal or verbal attacks on any officer or member of the Council
- Divulge, or require the answer to divulge confidential or exempt information
- Repeat questions or representations previously asked at earlier meetings unless there has been a material change of circumstances.

No debate will be allowed on any question or the response thereto.

Any person excluded from a meeting will lose the privilege of addressing any meeting for a period of twelve months or until such time as the Council may decide otherwise.

Other Ways To Ask Questions

Members of the public should be aware that rather than bringing questions to the entire Council and other members of the public during public question time, questions may also be addressed, during business hours by the Town Clerk's office, or via the Mayor or your ward member. These methods of communication are encouraged when more detailed dialogue is required than three minutes allow; the council meeting is not the correct forum for conducting long debates between council members and members of the public.