

More Questions Than Answers?

Your guide to asking questions at
Council and Cabinet.

March 2013



Epping Forest District Council
www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk

INTRODUCTION

At Epping Forest District Council we aim to put people first in all that we do. We are committed to encouraging local democracy, improving communication and making our services more accessible. One of the ways we do this is by allowing the public to ask questions at full Council and Cabinet meetings.

A full Council meeting will involve all 58 District Councillors. Some matters such as the setting of the council tax and the budget, and the approval of certain plans affecting the District can, by law, only be decided by the full Council. The Cabinet is a body within the Council which makes important decisions affecting the District. It carries out the broad policies for providing services and manages the budget set by Council. The Cabinet consists of between 3 and 10 Councillors, meetings of which are chaired by the Leader of Council. Each of the Cabinet members has a 'portfolio' which is akin to a Government Ministry. Although the number of Cabinet members may vary, as may the makeup of the portfolio, any question on Cabinet responsibilities will fall to one member of the Cabinet to give a reply.

At full Council meetings, your question may be answered by one of the Cabinet Members, (also known as Portfolio Holders), or the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. At a Cabinet

meeting your question will be answered by the Portfolio Holder responsible for the subject area the question falls within.

WHO MAY ASK A QUESTION?

The following people are entitled to ask a question at Council and Cabinet meetings:

- Anyone who lives in the District
- Anyone who works in the District
- Anyone who owns or operates a business in the District.
- Anyone who uses any of the Council's services.

HOW CAN I ASK A QUESTION?

Questions must be sent in writing or by e-mail (democraticservices@eppingforestdc.gov.uk) and received at least four working days before the relevant meeting. The question must contain the name, address and contact details of the person asking it. You will be notified within 48 hours as to whether the question is valid. You should provide the full text of the question and not merely an indication of the subject matter. There is a limit of two questions per member of the public at any one meeting.

WHAT MATTERS CAN BE THE SUBJECT OF QUESTIONS?

We wish to encourage public participation and will try to answer questions even if they are not strictly Council business but are of concern to local people. As such, general

questions relating to any aspect of the Council's business may be accepted. The role of local government has increased considerably over the years and the District Council now provides, or has an involvement with, the following:

- Traditional services such as housing, planning, leisure, highways, traffic management and environmental health.
- Other matters such as economic development, 'green' issues, crime and disorder and issues affecting young and older people.
- The well-being of the local community, including matters we deal with in partnership with others such as Essex County Council, the health service, the Police, voluntary and business sectors, and transport.

WHAT IF I AM UNSURE WHETHER MY QUESTION IS VALID?

Most Council services are dealt with by Cabinet members. Cabinet members have specific responsibilities for groups of related activities. It is likely therefore, at a Council meeting, that your question will be answered by a Cabinet Member.

The Democratic Services Team at the Council, is available to answer any questions you may have about the public questions' procedure.

The Team can advise you about the wording to use, whether the question is valid under the Council's

procedure and who should answer your question. If the question is valid they will also be able to advise you of the arrangements for dealing with it at the meeting.

WHAT MATTERS ARE EXCLUDED?

There are restrictions on what will be accepted. For practical reasons, each person is limited to two questions at any one meeting. Because full Council and Cabinet meetings are busy, a total of 15 minutes has been set aside to deal with questions. Questions falling under the following categories are specifically excluded from consideration:

- Matters clearly outside the Council's area of responsibility.
- Questions relating to specific planning applications or individual complaints.
- Issues of detail which might be more appropriately answered through other means.
- Questions relating to an individual or individuals.
- Where an answer is likely to lead to the disclosure of confidential information or where disclosure would be contrary to the public interest.
- Questions which might be regarded as offensive, mischievous or provocative.
- Instances where the question is the same or very similar to any question put to the Council in the previous six months.

Complaints are dealt with under the Council's Compliments and Complaints procedure. A separate leaflet is available from the Council on how to pursue a complaint.

HOW WILL THE QUESTION BE DEALT WITH AT THE COUNCIL MEETING?

The public questions session will normally be one of the first items dealt with at the meeting. Usually questions will be asked in the order they were received. The Chairman, who controls the meeting, can use his or her discretion to change the order to group together questions to cover similar subjects.

The Chairman will invite the questioner to ask the question. The appropriate Councillor will then respond. Supplementary questions are allowed but only if related to the original question or to clarify the original reply. If the question raises issues which need to be looked at in more depth, it may be decided to ask for a further written report, possibly for consideration by the Cabinet or Council itself at a future meeting. Once completed, a copy of the report will be sent to the questioner and made available as a public document.

Where a member of the public asking a question is not in attendance at the relevant meeting, the question will be withdrawn and a reply sent in writing by letter or email.

Questions and answers are recorded

in the minutes of the meetings which are available for inspection on the Council's website or at the Civic Offices, Epping. Written copies of questions and answers will be supplied to the questioner and the Councillor responding to the question.

If you wish to know the dates of Council and Cabinet meetings please contact the Council on the telephone number given below or check out our website at www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk.

For further information on public questions, write to:

**Democratic Services
Epping Forest District Council
Civic Offices 323 High Street
Epping Essex CM16 4BZ**

Or you can telephone
01992 564243 or 564244
Or alternatively you can e-mail:
democraticservices@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Other leaflets which may be of interest are:

"Your Voice, Your Choice" - A Guide to Speaking at the Council's Planning Committees.

"Compliments and Complaints" - A Guide on how to compliment or complain to the Council.

These are available at the District Council's Civic Offices, on the Council's Website or direct from Democratic Services