

More Questions Than Answers?

Your guide to asking questions at Council.

May 2008



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 Council meetings.

At Council meetings, your question may be answered by one of a number of officer holders including Cabinet Members, Committee Chairmen or the Chairman of the Council.

WHO MAY ASK A QUESTION?

The following people are entitled to ask a question at Council 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.

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 been 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 other agencies such as Essex Council Council, the health service, the Police, voluntary 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 that your question will be answered by a Cabinet Member. However, your question could be given to another Councillor if it is not a Cabinet matter.

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 your question at the Council meeting.

The public also has the option to ask questions at Cabinet meetings. If you wish to do so, please refer to the Council's "Ask the Cabinet" leaflet.

WHAT MATTERS ARE EXCLUDED?

There are restrictions on what will be accepted. For practical reasons, each person or representative of a person/persons is/are limited to two questions at any one Council meeting.

Because Council 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 Council 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 cover similar subjects.

The Chairman will invite the questioner or their representative 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 Council's 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.

A public record is kept of all questions and answers and supplementary reports. This is available for inspection at the Civic Offices, Epping.

HOW CAN I ASK A QUESTION?

Questions must be sent in writing or by e-mail. The deadline for receipt of a question is midday seven days before the Council 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.

If you wish to know the dates of Council 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: **Info@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.

"Ask the Cabinet" -
A Guide to asking questions at Cabinet meetings.

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

These are available at Council Information Centres, the Council's Website or direct from Democratic Services