

## Central Bedfordshire Council

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Thursday, 22 June 2017

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### Corporate Style of Minutes

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### Purpose of this report

1. To allow Members to discuss the corporate style of Minutes in light of the concerns raised by a Member at Council on 20th April 2017.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked to consider and comment on the report and the Council's corporate approach to Minute taking at formal Committee meetings.

### Background

2. At the Council meeting on 20 April 2017 a Member raised a concern regarding the level of detail contained in the Minutes of the previous meeting and the extent to which the preamble and debate had been captured in the note of the meeting. It was also queried whether the Minutes adhered to statutory requirements.

### Statutory requirements

3. The Council must comply with the Local Government Act (2000) in respect of recording executive decisions at meetings, which states that as soon as practicable after any meeting of a decision-making body a written statement for every executive decision must be produced including:-
  1. a record of the decision and date it was made;
  2. the reasons for the decision;
  3. details of any alternative options considered and rejected; and
  4. any conflicts of interest.
4. The Council is obliged to retain a written record of a meeting for a minimum of 6 years, although copies of Minutes are retained for a far longer period. There is some flexibility over the format of that record being mindful of the principles of openness and transparency.

## **Current approach**

5. There is no right or wrong way to prepare Minutes provided that Councils meet the statutory requirements outlined above. The form adopted by any particular local authority is a matter of individual choice. Minutes are not a verbatim record but a summary of the proceedings of a meeting that includes only the main threads of a discussion and the decision.
6. The Council's current approach is that Minutes should be selective and capture a sense of the meeting, that they are not an attempt to reproduce what everyone said. Things are recorded as briefly as possible generally utilising the following framework:-
  1. a statement of the matter under consideration;
  2. a few bullet points that provide a brief and concise summary of the main points made in discussion;
  3. the summation by the Chairman (where appropriate); and
  4. the conclusion of the item.
7. The Constitution also requires that the Minutes contain all motions and amendments presented to meetings in the exact form and order as put to the meeting.
8. In following this framework it is often convenient to summarise into one paragraph a point raised by one person that is taken up by others during the course of a debate.
9. Whilst this approach is generally applied to most meetings a slightly different style is often appropriate depending on the nature of the meeting. For example there are often a greater number of motions at Council meetings therefore they are often recorded in full in the Minutes. At Overview and Scrutiny meetings there is often more debate over the items on the agenda and therefore the concise summary of the debate is often longer than other meetings.
10. It is also important that the Minutes of a meeting do not repeat information that is enclosed within the body of the report being considered at the meeting. Therefore the preamble will often be succinct as the detail is contained elsewhere in the body of the report.

## **Webcasting meetings**

11. As part of our approach to openness and transparency in 2015 we started to webcast some of our meetings. Webcasts are currently available online to the public for a period of 6 months. Papers of the meetings are available for a period of 6 years on the Modern.Gov portal. It would be feasible to also share webcast recordings via Box for a longer period up to at least 6 years.
12. For those meetings that took place during 1 April 2016 and 31 March there have to date been more than 4,000 views of the webcasts.

13. The use of webcasting has led us to further consider our approach to the Minutes that we take at meetings in order to maximise the benefit of webcasts. At present staff administer meetings, facilitate webcasts and take formal notes, but Minutes vary in the level of detail provided depending on the nature of the meeting.
14. At present in some cases there is also duplication in the record of the meeting that is produced. For example for Executive meetings there is a decision digest, webcast and Minutes of the meeting (giving us three records of the same meeting).
15. Although we have experienced technical difficulties with some of our webcasts it is a rare occurrence that we are unable to produce a verbatim record of the meeting in the form of a video recording, such as occurred with the Council meeting in February 2017.
16. Our approach therefore has been to ensure that where a (verbatim) webcast record is available the written record of the meeting ought to be as succinct as possible. In those circumstances where a webcast recording is not available for a meeting or there is an item that attracts a lot of public interest a more detailed written record is made available.

#### **Options for consideration**

17. Given the duplication that is referred to in paragraphs 13-14 above it is proposed that we amend our approach to Minute taking at those meetings where a verbatim record of the meeting is provided via the webcast.
18. The principles at Appendix A propose that where a meeting is webcast the written Minutes of the meeting will only include a summary of any outcomes; the date of the meeting; the reasons for the decision; the details of any alternative options considered and rejected, either detailed in the written report or proposed and seconded during the discussion of the report at the meeting; and any conflicts of interest. The Minutes will still form the formal record of the meeting in line with statutory requirements but no further detailed Minutes of that meeting, including a summary of the key points raised in discussion, will be provided.
19. As required by the Council's Constitution the written Minutes will contain a record of all motions and amendments presented to meetings in the exact form and order as put to the meeting.
20. Members are invited to consider the existing principles for writing Minutes appended to the report and comment on whether this provides greater clarity for the future.
21. Members are also invited to consider whether the proposal to further reduce the written record of those meetings that are webcast is acceptable.

### **Reason/s for decision**

22. The principles appended aim to provide greater clarity on the content of Minutes and enable us to maximise the full benefit of webcasting meetings.

### **Council Priorities**

23. The publication of Minutes and webcasts of meetings supports the council in promoting openness and transparency and in particular will support the Council to be more efficient and responsive to residents.

### **Corporate Implications**

#### **Legal Implications**

24. The Council must comply with the Local Government Act (2000) in respect of recording executive decisions at meetings in the manner set out in paragraph 8 of this report. The principles appended to this report will enable the Council to deliver on its statutory obligations under the Local Government Act 2000.
25. The Minutes of the meeting will continue to be the formal record of the meeting under the requirements of the Local Government Act (2000).
26. Furthermore, Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations (2014) has strengthened the rights of the public and press to film, audio record, photograph, blog, tweet or use any other type of social media to report any public meetings of their councils, including committees, subcommittees and joint committees. Although these Regulations do not require Councils to webcast meetings it may be beneficial for the Council to have and make available one audio visual recording of some public meetings through webcasting.
27. Where there exists both a full and detailed written record of a meeting and a webcast recording of that meeting there is the potential for those records to be interpreted differently, it is considered therefore that where a verbatim record exists the written record of a meeting should be kept brief.
28. All footage from our webcasts is the copyright of Central Bedfordshire Council. The people featured in webcasts agree to appear only on the Council's official webcast site. Residents are not permitted to download any footage nor upload it (whether in part or in full) to another website without the written permission of Central Bedfordshire Council and those featured in the webcast. Also, video sharing websites (e.g. Youtube, Google Video) state under their terms and conditions that you must be the copyright owner and have the permission of all those involved in order to upload videos to their sites.

### **Financial and Risk Implications**

29. There are no financial implications arising from this report. Enhancing access to webcasts for a period of at least 6 years can be met from within existing budgets.

## **Equalities Implications**

30. Public Authorities must ensure that decisions are made in a way which minimises unfairness, and without a disproportionately negative effect on people from different ethnic groups, disabled people, women and men. It is important that Councillors are aware of this duty before they take a decision.
31. The production of a written record of a meeting and a verbatim webcast of a meeting supports the Council in providing openness and transparency to all residents of Central Bedfordshire and is likely to increase awareness of our democratic processes.

## **Conclusion and next Steps**

32. Subject to any comments from Members the approach to Minute taking at meetings, specifically those that are webcast will be implemented with immediate effect.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Principles for minute taking at meetings

## **Background Papers**

None

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