# Make the most of **council meetings**

## Transparency, accountability and integrity for local government meetings

## Before the meeting

### Meeting dates

The chairperson is responsible for:

- Arranging a meeting at least once in every calendar month
- Deciding where to meet – can be anywhere, or by phone or teleconference
- Ensuring full council and committee meetings are open to the public to observe, unless prevented by technology
- Managing the agenda – ensure there are not too many items on the agenda for one meeting, and prioritise the most important issues for discussion first on the agenda
- Ensuring written notice and agenda provided to councillors at least two days before the meeting
- If it is known in advance that the meeting may be closed to discuss a matter, making sure this is stated in the agenda
- Making sure councillors have a way of discussing views and ideas on key issues before the meeting

### Prepare

Read the agenda and all reports

Identify matters of interest or that could be controversial

Be well informed before the meeting – ask council officers (following the acceptable request guidelines) for more information or help with understanding any complex issues (if you still need more information, you can vote in the meeting to defer the matter)

Identify any matters where you have a conflict of interest and notify the CEO in writing as soon as practicable

Talk to your fellow councillors about their views on matters (unless you have a conflict of interest)

Read the minutes of the previous meeting – ask yourself whether they are a clear, accurate, concise and complete record of the business and the decisions of the meeting

### Quorum

- Attend all meetings where possible – apply to the chairperson for a leave of absence if you cannot attend
- Quorum is half of all councillors (e.g. 4/8 or 5/9)

## In the meeting

### Chairperson's role

- Manage and follow the agenda, unless there is an important or urgent issue that needs to be prioritised
- Supervise the preparation of the minutes
- Manage meeting behaviour
- Put relevant questions to the meeting and conduct the vote
- Make sure resolutions follow correct procedures
- Decide on points of order and other matters, for example if a councillor questions if procedures are being followed
- Hold a division if requested and make sure votes are recorded
- Clearly declare the result of all votes
- Adjourn the meeting if needed
- Declare the meeting closed when all business is complete

Allow everyone to take part:

- Encourage councillors to speak and clearly explain their views so that everyone's different views can be explored
- Stop individual councillors from speaking for too long
- Make sure councillors can be heard and there are no background discussions happening at the same time
- Ask councillors or council officers open-ended questions to get more information
- Invite councillors to put their ideas as a draft resolution
- Where appropriate, propose motions or amendments to motions that express the views of the meeting

### Motions and voting

- Motions usually need a mover and a seconder, except procedural motions
- Councillors can propose amendments to a motion – these must be agreed to before voting on the final motion
- Voting must be open (no secret ballots allowed)

- The chairperson votes along with all other councillors – if the votes are equal the chairperson then gets a second casting vote
- If a councillor who is present chooses not to vote (abstains), that vote is counted as a 'no' vote against the motion
- If a vote doesn't pass this doesn't mean the opposite decision was made – you must make a new resolution to refuse the motion (important for matters such as development applications)

### Keeping order

Councillors must respect the chairperson's directions. The chairperson must make sure that all councillors can participate:

- Make sure everyone sticks to the topic – don't allow councillors to personally criticise other councillors
- Stop any disruptive behaviour straight away – use a calm voice and direct everyone back to the purpose of the discussion
- Suggest taking a break if it could help
- Options for a chairperson include warning a councillor, ordering that they are demonstrating unsuitable meeting conduct and are reprimanded, or ordering that they leave the meeting

### Closing meetings

Councillors must make a resolution and vote to close a meeting to the public and explain the reason why (see right for the restricted list of valid reasons). No decisions can be made in closed session.

### Delegations

A council may (by resolution) delegate the power to make some types of decisions to the mayor, the CEO, a standing committee, or the chairperson of a standing committee.

If councillors have a conflict of interest and go under the quorum you must delegate the decision (if allowed), delay until a future meeting, or seek an exemption from the Minister.

## Scripts

### Suggested scripts for disruptive behaviour

Cr X, please focus on the matter we are deciding without personally criticising other councillors.

Cr X, please apologise to the councillor for your inappropriate personal remarks.

We will hear from Cr X now and I will turn to Cr Y next, so all councillors have a fair chance to speak.

Cr X, because you have kept disrupting I must order that you please leave for the rest of the meeting.

### Suggested script for closing meetings

I move that the meeting be closed to discuss item X, as it relates to:

- confidential legal advice obtained by council, or
- CEO employment matters (and senior executive employees of Brisbane City Council)
- other industrial matters affecting council employees, or
- the council budget or rating concessions, or
- matters that directly affect the health and safety of an individual or a group, or
- council's position in a negotiation, or
- matters that are required to be kept confidential under a law of, or formal agreement with, the Commonwealth or State.

The meeting must be opened again before voting on the matter. The minutes must record a summary of what was discussed while the meeting was closed. Even though the meeting was closed, the final meeting minutes must clearly record the reasons for the decision.

# Meeting minutes

The chairperson is responsible for supervising the CEO's recording of the minutes following a regular, easy-to-read format. All councillors are responsible for ensuring minutes are accurate and voting on whether to confirm minutes from the previous meeting.

Minutes must include:

- Any document or report, unless included with the agenda
- Names of councillors or committee members present
- Full details of conflicts of interest and how they were managed
- Clear and accurate records of resolutions, with enough details so anyone reading the minutes knows exactly what council decided
- How each councillor voted if a division is called
- Reasons for any decisions that are inconsistent with the recommendation or advice given by a council employee where the contract is for more than $200,000 or 1% of the council's net rate and utility charges (whichever is greater)
- Reasons for decisions where the decision is different to the policy or approach normally followed by the council, or a change from a policy previously adopted by the council

Once confirmed, minutes cannot be altered. Councils can pass a resolution noting a correction but cannot alter the original minutes.

To rescind a previous council decision, council must pass a new resolution and record in the minutes the reason for changing the previous decision.

### Recent reforms for meetings !

- Agenda to be published online for the community by 5pm the day after it's provided to councillors
- Committee meetings must have minutes
- Either the agenda or minutes must contain all reports considered
- Unconfirmed minutes must be published within 10 days, and confirmed minutes published as soon as practicable
- Fewer reasons why a meeting can be closed

## More information

For detailed information about meetings and good decision-making, including online training modules and legislation updates, visit the Department of Local Government, Racing and Multicultural Affairs website.

- ✉ lgreforms@dlgrma.qld.gov.au
- ☎ 07 3452 7148 from 8.30am–5pm Mon–Fri
- 🌐 www.dlgrma.qld.gov.au/councillors

# Effective decision-making

### Good decision-making means

- Only making decisions that are legally within council's power
- Being consistent with legislation, the local government principles, council's own policies, and the model meeting procedures
- Making considered and well-informed decisions
- Being impartial, objective and free from bias
- All councillors making decisions together
- Focusing on what is best for the whole community, not just your own division or area where you live

### A principles-based approach

When making decisions it's important to 'follow the rules', but also to consider the broader local government principles:

1. **Transparent and effective processes, and decision-making in the public interest**

2. **Sustainable development and management of assets and infrastructure, and delivery of effective services**

3. **Democratic representation social inclusion and meaningful community engagement**

4. **Good governance of, and by, local government**

5. **Ethical and legal behaviour of councillors, local government employees and councillor advisors**

Consider the principles carefully when deciding on changes to meeting procedures, or other processes that council uses to make decisions.

### Questions to ask council officers

- What alternative options were considered?
- How has council dealt with these matters in the past?
- How do other councils normally deal with the issue?
- Is the proposal good value for money and an efficient use of resources?
- What is the impact of this decision on council's budget?
- What risks have been considered, and how are risks being managed?

- What key issues have been raised in community consultation? If no consultation was undertaken, why?
- If an officer's report is confidential, why?
  - In future, can the information in reports be provided differently so reports can be published?
  - Can confidential elements such as names or personal information be protected or information presented to councillors in a separate confidential attachment, so reports can be published?
  - Can officers prepare a summary for publication?

### Community consultation

Make community engagement meaningful:

- If council officers are running the consultation, ask questions to make sure they considered everyone's views
- Take the time to understand the community's views, or the views of stakeholders who are going to be affected
- Where possible ask specific questions rather than simply providing a document for comment, for example Do you support allowing the community hall to be used by community groups free of charge?

### Open communication

- Prioritise communicating with your community
- Always be open and honest
- Aim to help your community understand the complex issues
- Encourage positivity
- Don't think about 'US' and 'THEM' – think about the community and council as always being on the same side
- Focus on finding out people's opinions, their reasons, and understanding what is important to them
- Use as many different 'channels' to talk to your community as you can (at events, meetings, using available council channels, social media, etc.)

### Transparency

- Keep meetings (including committee meetings) open or available for the community to observe (except during the COVID period if unsafe)
- Clearly record the reasons for all decisions
- Some reports or information may be confidential, but the basis of council's decisions must still be recorded for the community, so encourage officers to develop reports or