

Why Should You Record Meetings?

The Government Wants You To

On the 23rd February 2011 the Department for Communities and Local Government wrote to all council leaders and monitoring officers, the letter was headed, "Access to Meetings" (copy provided).

In that letter Bob Neill MP closed by writing, "In short transparency and openness should be the underlying principle behind everything councils do and in this digital age it is right that we modernise our approach to public access, recognising the contribution to transparency and *democratic debate* [my emphasis] that social media and similar tools can make."

I believe the key two words there are "democratic debate", members of the public can have no real debate on issues decided on by the council if they are not fully aware of the facts and discussions behind the decisions made on their behalf. Whilst in an ideal world everyone would attend council meetings we all know that this does not and will probably never happen. People have busy lives and Whitwell is a commuter village – meaning many people do not get home from work until 6PM or later. With meetings starting at 7PM this makes it very difficult for people to attend in person especially if they have children that need to be looked after.

Bob Neill also says, "Bloggers, tweeters, *residents with their own websites* [my emphasis] and users of Facebook and YouTube are increasingly a part of the modern world, blurring the lines between professional journalists and the public." Whitwell as a parish gets very little press, let alone the discussions that take place at the Parish Council meeting - yet modern communications mediums provide a perfect way to reach 100s of people nearly instantly. "Professional" journalists are not going to provide this service, the people of Whitwell are the ones that are going to provide this service, if they are allowed to do so.

I shall leave this section with one final quote from Bob Neill, "The public should rightly expect that elected representatives who have put themselves up for public office be prepared for their decisions to be as transparent as possible and welcome a direct line of communication to their electorate". Transparency comes no easier than allowing a recording of the discussions, debate and decisions taken to be made available to interested members of the public.

It Will Help With Quality Status

Democracy and Citizenship

"In order to thrive, democracies need active, involved, informed and engaged citizens."
[NALC, Democracy and Citizenship Guide Note]

Currently the only way parishioners of Whitwell can be informed of the whole decision making process is to attend the council meetings – which as already stated are not convenient for many due to the timing of them. Without being fully informed of discussions it is difficult to fully engage in the process and become active in it.

If meetings were recorded, people could listen to them at their leisure, become fully informed of discussions had and decisions taken.

Communication and Community Engagement

“Good communications and community involvement is critical to earning and maintaining the good will of the community you serve.” [NALC, Communication and Community Engagement Guide]

Good communication means not only communicating the details of decisions made, but also the intent behind and the background to those decisions.

Whilst the Parish Council does produce a newsletter four times a year and does have a website, none of these currently provide any real level of detail behind decisions taken – or at very best, only for a limited number of them.

“As statutory public bodies councils should be embracing modern communication methods to engage with their communities.” [NALC, Communication and Community Engagement Guide].

Currently the only modern communication the Parish Council undertakes is a difficult to navigate website, which provides limited information on the workings of meetings and the discussions that take place. The only people giving any real presence and discussions of Parish Council matters on the World Wide Web, Facebook, Twitter etc. are the people of Whitwell.

Reasons To Record

- It is standard practice at both Bolsover District and Derbyshire County Councils to record meetings, as it is at the majority of councils in the country.
- The Department for Communities and Local Government would like councils to be more accessible and accommodating to citizen journalists, including allowing the recording of meetings.
- Engagement – The council wishes to engage with the community, recordings can be part of this engagement and move the council towards the multi-media standards of access and communication people are now used seeing – This is even more important with younger members of the parish.

Public Perceptions

- Does the Parish Council have something to hide?
 - I don't believe so for a moment, but people as a whole do tend towards more cynical and negative view points, especially in the current climate of cuts and scandals around politicians in recent years.
- The current minutes do not show what discussions took place to come to a decision; they will not show that a councillor raised a specific point unless they did so as a proposal.
 - This may lead members of the public to think that issues were not debated and that points they personally raised with councillors were not brought to the meeting - This has a detrimental effect on public engagement and perception.
 - A recent example of this comes from the 4th January 2012 WPC precept meeting, at which Cllr. Munro debated grit bins and setting aside a sum of money for refilling them. This was never recorded in the minutes as it was not formally raised as a proposal to be voted on and Cllr. Munro later raised this at the January WPC Council Meeting as he felt it important that it was noted.

Arguments Against Recording

- It will discourage people from speaking at meetings.
 - Every member of the public I have spoken to about this has indicated that they would have no problem with raising points at meetings if they were recorded – and would in fact welcome it.
- People may not want what they have said on record due to fear of reprisals/come-back.
 - If this is a genuine fear, then the discussion of said items in a public forum is already not appropriate – members of the public already discuss what has happened and what has been said at the council meetings.
- Recordings may be used in an out of context “sound-bite” fashion.
 - To which we have to ask ourselves, which is more dangerous, someone paraphrasing what has been said in a “sound-bite” fashion, or hearing an actual recording of a meeting where the whole is also available? Currently I could write on my website that Cllr. X inferred all members of the parish should “go play with the busses” and there is nothing to say otherwise.

Arguments For Recording

- It will provide an indisputable record of discussions and events at meetings - this will put an end to “he-said, she-said” type disagreements where one party denies what has been said.
- It will provide a record of not only what decisions were made, but the actual intent behind those decisions – which is often far more important than the decision itself. This is especially important in future years where members of the council who made decisions may no longer be present i.e. retirement, not re-elected.
- It will allow members of the public unable to attend to gain an insight in to the events of a meeting. Some people do not have 2.5 hours of an evening to wait for what may be only one item of interest to be discussed - with a recording they could skip to the item they are interested in and still be engaged with the council far more than they are now.
- If councillors are unable to attend a meeting, they can have a complete grasp of exactly what was discussed at that meeting for when they attend subsequent meetings. This will result in more informed decisions and choices being made, without time wasted covering old ground.
- Above all it will provide accountability to the community, holding elected members to the promises they have made.

Why I Personally Want To Record Meetings

- To provide a more accurate and enlightening record of how the parish is being governed, by means of:
 - Providing access to the *full* audio recording, allowing people to jump to the specific agenda item number they have an interest in – this would be provided on my website.
 - Providing access to a detailed summary of the meetings in written form to those who request it and via my website. I currently already do this, although it takes two people and many hours to do so from written notes – a recording that could be played back would reduce this time and reduce the potential for errors. I know a number of councillors already read these notes, as do a good number of parishioners both online and via printed copies.

What Will It Cost?

There are three possible answers to this question:

- 1) Nothing – you chose to carry on as you are.
- 2) Nothing – you chose to let someone else record the meetings and provide you with a copy.
 - a. If the Parish Council wished to go down this path I am more than happy to do this and have attached a draft agreement with safeguards in place to address concerns previously raised.
- 3) < £100 – You chose to record the meetings using a professional recorder from someone like Tascam. Other than the initial cost, it will use 2 AA batteries every 3-6 months and take 5 minutes of time to copy the recording off of it to computer. There are free editing programs available to trim and down-sample etc.

Where Will The Money Come From?

It could come from your website budget – currently this stands at £300 for the year for the hosting and maintenance. The maintenance can be brought “in-house”, costing nothing to add categories, pages or updates. The web site hosting and UKERNA domain fees can be found for considerably less than £300 for such a small and simple website.