

Preparing for Precinct Meetings

Training Session Notes

Waverley Council

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SECTION 1

PRECINCT COMMITTEES: OBJECTIVES AND STRUCTURE

PRECINCT COMMITTEES

Precincts are committees are public meetings and open to anyone. They meet regularly to **discuss matters of concern** to the **local area**. Only **residents and property owners** of the particular precinct are entitled to vote.

They are **not single issue groups**; nor are they **dominated by any group with a specific political platform or single interest**. The **credibility and effectiveness** of the Precinct system relies on the goodwill generated by Precincts being seen to be **broadly representative** of the views of residents of the Precinct area.

They have a charter of **open and informed debate** and **commentary** on matters affecting their area. They are **recommending bodies/committees** and a **source of community opinion** for Council. **Decisions made by Precincts are not binding on Council.**

OBJECTIVES OF PRECINCTS

1. To encourage a close link between Council and the community by establishing and maintaining a two way flow of communication and information.
2. To encourage residents to actively participate in Council decision making relevant to their area.
3. To alert Councillors about areas of concern in their wards and to provide community input to Councillors.
4. To assist Council to canvas residents' views on local issues and to maintain open and accountable government in Waverley.
5. To improve the local Precinct area by providing a forum to discuss local issues.
6. To promote good working relationships with Council through its Councillors, staff and other members of the community.
7. To encourage positive interaction between the community and their environment.

Precincts meet their Objectives through:

(a) The work of the Precinct Executive and other designated positions on the Committee.

(b) Precinct Committee meetings.

This training looks at making these two essential structures as effective as possible.

PRECINCT EXECUTIVE

1.1 Composition

A Precinct Executive consists of at least two people:

- The Convenor.
- The Secretary.

However, many Precincts have larger executives to handle the volume of issues in the area more effectively with representatives delegated to handle single areas of concern.

The majority of Precincts also have:

- Development Application Representative.
- Traffic Representative.

1.2 Role of the Precinct Executive

(a) To maintain the vitality of the Precinct system by holding Precinct meetings at least three times per year including an Annual General Meeting.

(b) To supply timely input to Council on issues affecting the amenity of the local Precinct.

(c) To assist Council in formulating its programs by providing information about the needs of local Precincts.

(d) To encourage all residents in the Precinct and Ward Councillors to attend meetings.

(e) To record minutes of decisions and issues expressed at meetings and to forward to Council a copy of the minutes and attendance sheets.

(e) To act between Precinct meetings under delegated authority of the Precinct, unless the Precinct decides otherwise.

NB: Where Precinct Executives act under delegated authority they must report on the decisions they have made and actions they have taken at the next available Precinct meeting so that the decisions/actions may be ratified by the Precinct's members who are eligible to vote. If the decisions and/or actions are not ratified the Precinct will decide what actions must

then be taken.

PRECINCT COMMITTEE ROLES

1. Convenor/Chair

The role of the Convenor/Chair of Precinct Committees is similar to the roles played in many community groups. These include the following:

- Being the main contact person for the Precinct for residents, Councillors, and Council staff.
- Organising the Precinct Committee meetings, together with the Secretary.
- Chairing Precinct Committee meetings.
- Taking the leadership role in the Committee in ensuring the Objectives of Precinct Committees are met.
- Ensuring that other members of the Executive or other designated positions in the Committee carry out their roles effectively.
- Usually being the main media spokesperson for the group. Ensure that any comments are, overall, reflective of the precincts' stance on a particular issue and do not give personal opinions if being quoted as a representative of the precinct.

Preparing meetings and chairing them effectively are covered in more detail later in these training notes.

2. Secretary

The Secretary's main role is administrative. This includes the following:

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- Work with the Convenor to organise the Precinct Committee meetings.
- Minute the Precinct meetings and ensure that they are sent to Council in a timely manner.
- Ensure that there is an attendance sheet at the meeting and that it is filled in and a copy attached to the minutes when they are sent to Council.
- Keep a record of correspondence in and out and ensure that the correspondence is tabled at the Precinct meeting. A list of correspondence table or received does not need to be minuted.
- Keep the official records of the Committee. This may include membership information, correspondence, reports etc.
- Checking minutes before they are forwarded to the Community Liaison Coordinator for distribution

Preparing meetings and minuting them effectively are covered in more detail later in these training notes.

3. The DA Representative

The DA Representative has a very specific role.

- Study the list of DA's sent to them that are relevant to the Precinct.
- Access the DA files and any reports relating to them (such as Environmental Impact Statements). For *current DA's – these are available at the Planning Counter 55 Spring St.* Old DAs are held at Chambers, but can be requested through 55 Spring St.
- Information on Development Applications can be obtained by calling the Planning Duty Officer on **9369 8008**
- Think about those that are likely to have an impact in the Precinct.
- Prepare a short report for the Precinct meeting on the potential impacts – both positive and negative – and any possible actions Council could take to ameliorate negative impacts.
- Presenting this report to the Precinct meeting and facilitating the discussion of the DAs together with the Convenor. They should ensure that copies of relevant plans, reports etc, have been made and are presented with their report at the meeting.
- Checking on the progress of DAs through the Development Control Committee and reporting on this to the Precinct. This can be done online OR by phoning the Planning Duty Officer (9369 8008) OR by going to 55 Spring St

NB: Where the notification period for a DA is over before the next Precinct meeting, the Executive can discuss the DA & forward a comment /objection/letter to the Planning Department on behalf of the Precinct.

4. The Traffic Representative

Like the DA Representative, the Traffic Representative has a very specific role.

- Read the minutes of the Waverley Traffic Committee and see what issues brought up there have an impact in the Precinct and which need to be brought to the Precinct Meeting for information or discussion.
- Identify any other traffic matters that may be relevant by checking Council's website.
- Search past minutes on Councils' web site to see if the item/issue has gone to the Traffic Committee previously and whether there is a solution

/works proposed w/ date of implementation OR whether it may have been refused and the reasons for this.

- Present a clear report combining these two elements highlighting any areas that are for discussion at the Precinct Meeting.

5. Precinct Subcommittees

A Precinct Committee may decide to establish one or more sub committees to assist them in their work.

- Subcommittees elect a chairperson who is responsible for ensuring the sub committee meets as required and reports on its discussions to the next meeting of the Precinct Committee.
- Any recommendations from a Precinct Committee sub committee must be voted on by the Precinct Committee and the result recorded in the minutes of the Precinct Committee meeting.
- The Precinct Committee sub committee only has delegated authority to make decisions and/or take action between Precinct meetings if the Precinct specifically delegates this authority by a vote of the Precinct, in which case, they must report on the decisions they have made and actions they have taken at the next available Precinct meeting so that the decisions/actions may be ratified by the Precinct Committee. If the decisions and/or actions are not ratified the Precinct will decide what actions must then be taken.

SECTION 2

PRECINCT MEETINGS: BEFORE THE MEETING

PREPARE AGENDA & REPORTS

- **It is the job of the Precinct Convenor to develop the Agenda for the Precinct Meeting.** They may share this with the Secretary.
- The basic items on an Agenda should include:
 1. Minutes of previous meeting and business arising
 2. Police report
 3. DA report
 4. Traffic report
 5. General business
- If there are specific items for the Agenda other than these, they should be specified in the Agenda BEFORE General Business.
- Remember, the Agenda is a public document that should be informative and clear and act as an invitation to residents to attend the meeting. Treat it seriously.
- **It is the job of the Precinct Secretary to ensure that the Precinct Meeting is well publicized and that adequate notice is given, Agendas should be with Council no less than 20 working days prior to the meeting to allow for printing and distribution.**
- It is up to the Precinct Executive and the designated members – DA Representative, Traffic Representative etc. – to DO YOUR HOMEWORK BEFORE the meeting:
 - The Convenor and Secretary should check on the progress of action on any recommendations and/or motions from the previous meeting. Prepare a short clear report on these for the Meeting.
 - Check the DA's that are coming up and identify the issues to raise at the meeting and think about some recommendations that can be put to guide the discussion.
 - Do the same for any material from the Council Traffic Committee.
- If a precinct member asks for a specific item to be put on the Agenda, ask them to DO THEIR HOMEWORK. Ask them to put together a short report they can deliver verbally or in written form (together with any relevant supporting material) and to come with some recommendations/motions for the Meeting to decide on.

- It's a good idea to plan how long to give each Agenda item. The Convenor will know this for the report they are presenting, and should check this with the other people giving reports. If someone from the precinct wants to put an item on the Agenda ask them how much time they will need for this item.
- If you receive regular reports from the Police make sure the person coming is prepared and knows how long they have to present their report.
- Never allocate all the time available. As a rule of thumb, plan no more than 80% of the duration of the meeting.

CREATE A SETTING TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

- At the start of the Meeting itself, make sure the room is laid out in the best way to encourage discussion and participation from all those attending. Think in particular about who should sit at the Chair's table – ideally it should only be the Chair and the Secretary; anyone else can be called on to come forward when they need to.
- Make sure you have copies of all the material people are going to need to participate fully – agenda, minutes, reports, planning sketches, etc. You will need enough to distribute to those attending.
- This is up to the Precinct Executive and any designated positions – DA Representative, Traffic Representative – to do.
- **Consider what you can do to support the participation of people with a disability - visually impaired, hearing impaired, those with mobility difficulties – and people not fluent in English. For example, if you are using maps or diagrams from the Chair, make the large enough to be visible from the back of the room.**

SECTION 3

PRECINCT MEETINGS: MANAGING THE MEETING

ROLE OF A CHAIR OF PRECINCT COMMITTEES

From the description of the purpose of Precinct Committees, the role of the Chair can be described as one of **facilitation**.

The table below outlines key aspects of the role of meeting facilitators and sets beside it the expectations Council has of Chairs as stated on Council's website. As you can see, the roles are entirely compatible.

Aspects of facilitators role	Council's expectations of Chairs
1. Knowing the purpose of the meeting and the expected outcomes.	Organised. Is familiar with the agenda.
2. Knowing/setting clear ground rules for conduct of the meeting that are appropriate to the purpose of the meeting.	Knows the rules.
3. Understanding enough about meeting is being held to enable them to keep participants on track to achieve the purpose.	Organised. Is familiar with the agenda. Focuses the meeting on the issues.
4. Assisting all participants to engage in the process appropriately.	Is impartial. Sees that everyone gets a fair chance to speak. Maintains courteous relations within the meeting.
5. Ensuring that the meeting runs smoothly from start to finish.	Organised. Is familiar with the agenda. Knows the rules. Focuses the meeting on the issues. Starts and finishes meetings on time.
6. Dealing quickly and constructively with conflict if it arises.	Is impartial. Is confident. Maintains courteous relations within the meeting.
7. Ensuring that the meeting is recorded appropriately and accurately, particularly any recommendations/motions.	Summarising what has been agreed. Ensuring that action has been defined, what is to be done, by whom, when. Checking that the Secretary has a record.

AT THE START OF THE MEETING

- Welcome people as they come in. Just something as simple as a 'hello' or 'welcome' or 'good to see you' immediately makes people feel acknowledged and included and ready to participate.
- Make sure people sign the Attendance Sheet. The Attendance Sheet must record the name, home address, residential property address (if relevant), contact phone number and signature of those people present who agree to supply this information. **Only those people who complete the register may vote, if they are eligible.** Totals of all people attending must be shown.
- Introduce yourself and the other members of the Precinct Executive. Don't assume people know you.
- Introduce any Councillors or Council staff present and explain their role.
- Introduce any other participants who are not residents and explain what their role will be in the meeting. You may want to ask at the start for anyone who is not a resident and whom you haven't identified already to introduce themselves and say why they are attending. It's very important for full participation that all participants know who is in the room and why.
- Remind people of the purpose of Precinct Meetings – don't assume everyone will know this.
- Explain how the meeting will run and any 'ground rules' as per the next section.
- Ensure the meeting has a quorum before it commences and during the course of the meeting. A quorum is at least five Precinct members who have voting rights including at least one member of the Precinct Executive.

EXPLAIN THE GROUND RULES

- Setting ground rules for how participants conduct themselves during meetings helps to manage time, process, and outcomes of meetings.
- Ground rules are useful in ensuring inclusive processes in meetings.
- Ground rules protect vulnerable participants in meetings.
- Ground rules can help to manage conflict during meetings.
- Ground rules should cover how the meeting will run, how it will be recorded, and how decisions/motions will be made. Examples of these rules are:
 - Chair will keep a speakers list on all agenda items and invite people to speak.
 - When asked, people have x minutes each to speak.
 - Voting on motions will be on a show of hands for and against.
- Ground rules should also cover how people are expected to behave toward each other in the meeting to ensure everyone gets a fair say. Examples of these kinds of rules are:
 - Respect others differences, experiences and limitations.
 - No attacking, blaming, putting-down, dismissing or minimising.
 - All ideas are held up for consideration, reflection and inquiry.

REVIEW THE AGENDA

- Read over the Agenda to all attending at the start of the meeting.
- Ask if there are any additions to be made. See if they can be dealt with under existing items or whether you need to note them for the General Business section of the meeting.
- On the Agenda, identify how long each item should take so the Chair and Secretary can keep track of the time. People don't like items to drag on. They also like to know how long it will be before you get around to the item they are interested in. This is particularly important for the DA report and the General Business items where discussion can drag on.
- Make these time frames realistic.
- It's a good idea for the Secretary to act as a timekeeper for the Agenda and to remind the Chair person when time is up on an agenda.

MANAGE THE TIME DURING THE MEETING

- Meetings should start on time and end on time, no excuses.
- Keep a tight control on discussion.
 - Bring speakers back to the point.
 - Remind speakers how much time they have left.
 - Think about asking at the start of an agenda item who wants to speak on it and have a speakers list.
- Focus on getting the outcomes for the Precinct Committee met on each Agenda item. Let discussion happen for a short time then ask if anyone has a recommendation or motion to make as a way of focusing further discussion.
- If there is a need to extend the time on an agenda item or the meeting as a whole, get the agreement of participants on how long to extend it for and stick to it.
- Before extending time on an agenda item, consider whether it needs to be resolved/ finalized at this meeting.
- Consider alternative ways of dealing with unfinished business between meetings – delegation to a member/task group/sub committee.
- Strictly manage any guest speakers.
 - Tell them in advance how long they have to speak and make them stick to it.
 - Limit the number of questions to them.
- Consider alternative ways of dealing with unfinished business between meetings. It's usual for the Executive members of a Precinct Committee to have the power to discuss issues and make decisions that are in keeping with the overall views of the Precinct Committee on the basis of past discussions and decisions.

MANAGE THE DISCUSSION TO ACHIEVE PARTICIPATION FROM ALL

- Keep all discussion focused on the topic. Be confident about stepping in and putting people back on track.
- If necessary, note other matters people bring up for later discussion.
- Make sure everyone has whatever material they need to engage in the discussion. If they don't then make sure it is gone through thoroughly before discussion starts.
- Use inclusive discussion strategies. These include:
 - Speakers' lists.
 - Asking each person in turn to make a comment or pass.
 - Be aware of those who haven't said anything and make a point of asking them for their view.
- Make sure people say who they are before they speak.
- Treat all participants equally. New comers should get as much time as regulars. If you are going to call a regular by their name, do the same with new comers. A good way to do this is to get people to say their names at the start of the meeting and to note where they are sitting.
- Move the discussion on when necessary. Be confident!
- Where recommendations or decisions need to be made, guide the group in making them appropriately and effectively.
- Manage the group dynamics, including any conflict that arises.

MANAGE MINUTES OF THE MEETING

- Minutes of a meeting are:
 - A record of issues discussed and decisions of a meeting.
 - A record of who is to undertake agreed tasks and the time frame for this.
 - A basis for discussion at the next meeting of any matters arising in between meetings.
 - A permanent legal record.
 - An informative record for those who couldn't attend.

- Taking minutes requires two skills: listening and note taking

- The Chair and the Secretary are jointly responsible for making sure the minutes are accurate.

- The Chair's role in this is:
 - Encourage and facilitate open discussion.
 - Assist speakers to clarify what they are saying – actively listen.
 - Summarise points made in a discussion.
 - Clarify what has been agreed to as decisions or actions.

- The Secretary's role in this is:
 - Assist the Chair in clarifying what is being said.
 - Take down the key points in a discussion – dot point form is fine, don't try and keep a word-for-word record.
 - **But**, make sure any recommendation is noted exactly as it is put.
 - Check you have an accurate record of the item. It is always good practice for the Secretary to read back what they have written.
 - Ensure that a record of any actions includes who is to do them and the time frame.

Good minutes:

- Are short, clear and concise – keep them to a maximum of 4 pages.
- Follow the agenda exactly, with identical numbers and item headings.
- Include a brief summary of each item and of submitted reports. They are not verbatim reports of what people say.
- They are public documents and care must be taken to make sure that they do not contain material that is offensive or which may put the Council at risk of legal action. For example, ascribing political bias to people, asserting that people have taken particular actions where there is no evidence presented of this, ascribing motives to people's actions that are unprovable.
- Record the name of the chair, the starting and finishing times and the number of attendees.
- Record each motion that was carried and lost, the proposer and the seconder and the voting numbers both for and against.
- Record any action that needs to be taken by whom, when and where
- Are completed as soon as possible after the meeting.
- Are checked and signed off by the chairman of the meeting.
- Use bold, underline and capitals to make items stand out.
- Use a separate paragraph for each item and sub paragraphs for details or lists of points.
- Try not to extend any block of text to more than four lines
- Use short sentences – no longer than 25 words. A sentence will be too long if it contains too many ideas. Begin by identifying its main idea. Remove everything else. Other ideas can either be put in their own sentences or omitted if they are not important.
- Summarise discussion if necessary - don't record unnecessary dialogue – he said, she said etc.
- If you are having difficulty remember that you can work back from the motions and record only the points that add clarification to the discussion. There is no need to add lengthy reasons or justification for the decision.

PRECINCT MEETING MINUTES GUIDELINE

Precinct Name & date	
Meeting commenced at :	
Attendance (list Councillors, guest speakers, Council staff & total number of residents)	
Apologies	
Adoption of Previous Minutes (accepted with/without amendments)	
Business Arising from previous minutes	
Agenda item. Brief description of discussion (can be dot point)	1. 2. 3.
Decisions/Actions 1. Requests for Service Desk 2. Summary of any motions (include name of proposer/seconded & number of votes for/against 3. Queries to be followed up by the precinct	
General Business	
Meeting closed at:	
Next meeting	

MANAGE DECISION MAKING

- It is absolutely essential that all participants are very clear how decisions will be taken in the Precinct Meeting.
- This information should be part of the introductory statements by the Chair at the start of the meeting.
- Not all the business of the Precinct Committee needs to lead to a motion. Remember, it is a forum for discussion. It is within the purposes of the Committee simply to record the various views on an issue without seeking to quantify those for or against it.
- It is important when recording a discussion to record points made in favour of a particular view or action and points made against it. This is the only way to ensure that those who will use the record of the meeting to inform their own decision-making have a clear idea of all viewpoints.
- Not all decisions need to be taken by a formal vote. Consensus decisions are those where participants agree that a particular statement accurately reflects the view held by all. They are not usually put as motions.
- When a vote is called for, it is essential that accurate counts are taken and recorded of those in favour, those opposed and those abstaining.