

Reasons for Absence from Meetings:

This memo is intended to clarify the position regarding reasons for absence from meetings. All the content has come directly from Lynda Ogilvy at NALC.

Councillors are required to provide a reason for their absence, otherwise it is not possible for the council to approve the absence, and this could result in a councillor losing his place on the council if he is absent from all meetings for 6 months. However, it does not need to be recorded in the minutes, but can be kept in a separate book specially for this purpose. The issue may be that councillors who are, for example, on holiday, do not wish this to be made public because it might alert burglars to the fact that they are away. Also some reasons for absence might be personal, and again it could be seen as inappropriate to reveal this publicly.

However, the record of the reasons for absence could be requested under the Freedom of Information Act, and it is unlikely that this could be considered exempt information. It would be reasonable for electors to know why their elected member did not attend meetings, so it would need to be copied for anyone who requested it. However, this is likely to be sometime after the event, so should not be a problem.

If the council has been recording the reasons for absence in the minutes for some time, it may be that councillors have come to think that it is mandatory. It is not - and can be dealt with as above.

The following clarifies that giving the reason 'business' or 'personal' is not acceptable:

The absent councillor needs to give sufficient information about his/her absence so that the parish council can decide whether to approve the absence or not. In most cases a councillor will be absent for an occasional meeting from time to time, so this doesn't become important, but if there is any danger of a councillor falling foul of the 6-month rule, then the council must formally approve their absence in order for them to remain on the council. The council really cannot do this unless the reason for absence is clear - just saying 'business' or 'personal' does not give enough information, especially 'personal' which could be just about anything.

I would suggest that councillors try to give a clear reason for their absence - they must remember that they have put themselves forward for office and the most important aspect of their role as a councillor is to attend meetings regularly. It would be better to say 'family birthday party' rather than just 'personal' and I am sure that the council (and electors) would understand this as a valid reason for absence from time to time. If it happened every month it would be a different matter, but this is unlikely.