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PORLOCK



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Parish Council

Communications and Social Media Policy

Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to enable clear, civil, respectful and easy to use channels of communication in relation to members of the public, other agencies, fellow Council members and Officers, the press and Parish Council staff. The Parish Council aims to provide information on important matters affecting the community and to encourage informed comment and engagement with interested individuals and groups.

Each Parish Councillor has a duty to represent, without bias, the interests of the whole community and must communicate according to the Council's Standing Orders and Code of Conduct at all times, in all forms of communication. No individual councillor can respond to enquiries outside of Parish Council meetings other than to acknowledge such an enquiry, and cannot make a decision or express an opinion on behalf of the Parish Council. In particular councillors and Council employees do not have the right to obtain confidential information unless it is pertinent to their official duties, and must be fully compliant with GDPR regulations.

In general, and unless agreed otherwise at Full Council, the Council's communication is managed by the Clerk. In the spirit of effectiveness, it has been agreed at Full Council that the Chair, Vice-Chair and Clerk may develop draft documents and communications before seeking input from the rest of Council.

Council Meetings

The Parish Council meets on the second Wednesday of the month at 7.00pm in the Village Hall, and sub-committees such as Planning, Finance and HR meet from time to time according to the Council's published meeting schedule. At every Council meeting there is an opportunity for members of the public to raise a matter of concern or to comment on an item on the agenda. After the conclusion of the public participation section however, members of the public are not permitted to contribute to further agenda items unless permission is granted by the meeting Chair. Further details can be found in the Council's meeting agendas and Standing Orders.

Annual Meeting of the Parish Council

This meeting will be held in May. It is in effect a normal Council meeting except that item one on the agenda has to be 'The election of the Chair'.

Annual Parish Meeting

This is a meeting of the Parish and not the Parish Council. Electors can contribute to the agenda and these meetings can celebrate local activities and debate current issues in the community. Seven clear days' notice of the meeting will be given, and the meeting will normally be held in April each year, immediately before the April Council meeting.

Private Meetings

Private meetings arranged between representatives of the Council and other organisations enable the Council to liaise with these organisations on specific matters. Meetings must be reported to the Council and representatives should adhere to the known policy of the Council. There should be no decision making by individuals at such meetings. The Clerk should be present wherever possible to take notes of the meeting, and ideally a minimum of two councillors should attend.

Filming and Recording of Meetings

The right to record, film and to broadcast meetings of the council, committees and subcommittees is established following the Local Government Audit and Accountability Act 2014. Members of the public are therefore permitted to film or record open elements of Council meetings, as long as it is carried out in a non-disruptive way and does not interfere with any person's ability to participate fully in the meeting.

While councillors and the Clerk are deemed to have consented to the filming, recording or broadcasting of meetings, those doing so must respect the rights of other people attending under the Data Protection Act 1998.

Meetings or parts of meetings from which the press and public are excluded may not be filmed or recorded. Press and public can be excluded from some aspects of Council meetings in respect of prejudicial public interest, for example taking legal advice, commercially sensitive information or discussion of employment matters.

Correspondence

All correspondence to the Parish Council should be addressed to the Clerk. This will ensure that the matter is recorded and passed to the Council as appropriate, for example to be dealt with at the next Council meeting. If a parishioner wishes a subject to be raised, and it is appropriate for discussion at a Parish Council meeting, the Clerk must be notified at least seven days before the publication of the agenda.

The Council will determine the response, if any, to correspondence received. The Council reserves the right to not respond to any correspondents that are taking up a disproportionate amount of the Clerk's time. Advice will be sought upon receipt of vexatious communications and acted upon accordingly.

All official correspondence from the Parish Council should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council. Correspondence from individual councillors should be avoided; however, there may be exceptional situations when it is appropriate for a councillor to issue correspondence in their own name. Such correspondence must be authorised by Full Council.

Communication with the Press and Public

The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, in consultation with the Chair. The Clerk will be the first point of contact for the media; however, where it is appropriate for a councillor to represent the Parish Council, the Chair or Vice-Chair shall be authorised as the official spokes-people for the council.

Individual councillors will not be permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Council, unless instructed by the Clerk. In the restricted period before an election, commonly known as "purdah" media releases will not include quotes from councillors who are due for re-election

Press reports from the Parish Council, its committees or working groups shall be sent from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.

Unless a councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view.

Council members may be regularly approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. At no time should councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to promise to investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to the Parish Council.

Depending on the issue raised it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- refer the matter to the Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate;
- request an item on a relevant meeting agenda;
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Clerk.

Unless a councillor is absolutely certain that they are reporting the view of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view. The only clear way of being aware of the Council's view is if the matter has been discussed at a Full Council meeting and a decision made on that item, or if it is stated Council policy.

Internal Communication

Email, WhatsApp or telephone calls/text cannot be used for formal Council decision making, which takes place at Full Council and committee meetings. Email is the official means of internal Council communication, and while other means can be useful in specific situations, they should be kept to a minimum.

Emails should only be sent from authorised Parish Council email addresses or secure addresses used expressly for Council business; general personal email addresses should not be used. The content of all emails should be civil and respectful and be in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders and Code of Conduct.

No communications, especially email should contain anything that may be deemed libellous, or that might cause concern if it were to be read by a member of the public. The personal data of individuals must not be published without express, written permission. If information is provided in an email or conversation or other means, consent to pass on that information to others should not be presumed.

In general, when councillors communicate with each other by email, they should use the "Reply All" option to ensure that all councillors are fully aware of all information which is pertinent to them and the point under discussion. Where an item is linked to standard sub-committee business, committee members should communicate with each other rather than all Council members.

The foregoing is not designed to preclude private and/or personal communications between Councillors and/or Officers in the daily running of the Council.

Telephone calls should be kept to a minimum and be appropriate to the work of the Council. At all times instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk, other Council employees or councillors, and their working hours should be respected.

General External Communications

All communications from the Council, especially media such as the website, notice boards and social media will meet the following criteria. The Council also reserves the right to remove any material posted by others that does not meet these criteria (for example comments on Council Facebook posts).

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which Council does not own the copyright;
- Not contain any personal information.
- Not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

Website

In the interests of transparency and to provide electors with a clear picture of its activities, the Parish Council will publish information on the Parish Council website. This will include, but not be limited to, Council meeting agendas, the full minutes of Council meetings, Policies and Procedures, Sub-Committee agendas and meeting minutes, Working Group activities and a publication scheme. Hard copies are available by request to the Clerk.

Newsletter

The Parish Council currently does not publish a regular newsletter, however when there are a number of items of sufficient interest, newsletters can be published on an ad hoc basis and distributed via strategic points within the parishes, including notice boards and the Council website.

Notice boards

The Council notice boards display statutory notices and other items of interest to the community. Due to limited space, more comprehensive information is available on the Council website.

Social Media

The Council has a Facebook account and will only use it according to this policy, managed by the admin officer under the instruction of the Clerk. Its primary use is to promote the activities of the Council, and the Council and individual councillors will not comment on or reply to the social media posts of any members of the public or other parties.

Only under exceptional circumstances, for example to clarify facts or put the Council's position on the record, will the Council make statements on its own Facebook account, which relate to other parties' Facebook posts. Again, this is under the management of the Clerk.

All councillors and officers are free to operate their own personal website, blog, or social media accounts, however, they should still be mindful of the Council's Communication and Social Media Policy. Councillors should not include the term "councillor" (or any related abbreviations) in their web address, blog address, social media handles and/or accounts.

July 2023