

Harberton Parish Council

Communications Protocol

This Communications Protocol has been adapted from model Town & Parish Council policy documents published by the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC). This protocol lays out how information is shared internally and with external stakeholders, such as the public and the press/media.

A. Parish Council Correspondence

- (i) The point of contact for the parish council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the parish council should be addressed.
- (ii) The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- (iii) No individual Councillor or Officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the parish council, a committee, sub-committee or working party. In particular, Councillors and Officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.
- (iv) Most official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letter headed paper. For correspondence not sent by the Clerk, the Clerk must be provided with a copy.
- (v) Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (e.g. copy to XX).

B. Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Parties

- (i) Agenda should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision, and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- (ii) Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- (iii) Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

C. Communications with the Press and Media

- (i) The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.
- (ii) In accordance with standing orders, the press shall be provided reasonable facilities for the taking of their report of all or part of a meeting at which they are entitled to be present.
- (iii) The Press/Media and public may be excluded for whole or part of a meeting of the Parish Council if the Council resolves that publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted. This may include

particular occasions such as employment issues, tenders and proposals, legal proceedings and disputes. It is not lawful to exclude some of the public or some of the press or vice versa.

- (iv) The Press/Media has no greater right to be present at a meeting of the Parish Council than the public. They are entitled to copies of the agenda and necessary supporting papers for meetings, and maybe charged a small administration fee for photocopying or postage if paper copies are requested.
- (v) If you are a member of the press and wish to contact the council with an enquiry you should contact the Clerk in the first instance.
- (vi) The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chair of the council and/or the Chair of the relevant committee.
- (vii) Press reports from the council, its committees or working parties should be from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- (viii) 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.
- (ix) The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- (x) Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who responsible and appropriate action was taken.
- (xi) When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from the Council's solicitor before any response is made. Whenever possible any information given to the press shall be given in writing so as not to leave interpretation open to misunderstanding and misreporting.

D. Social Media

- (i) The Parish Council may share information via social media channels (Facebook, Instagram etc) to provide relevant updates, activities and opportunities within the Parish.
- (ii) The Parish Council's social media channels will be created and managed solely by the Parish Council Clerk. No Councillors will have access to the page for administration purposes.
- (iii) Communications via the Parish Council's social media channels must meet the following criteria:
 - 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 which we do not have permission to share;
 - not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
 - be moderated by the Clerk to the Council;
 - not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

- (iv) The Clerk will remove messages or comments on Parish Council social media posts which include:
 - Abusive language content
 - Content which may cause offence to a specific group of people eg comments on a person's sexuality, sexist comments, racial comments etc.
 - Content which contains potentially libellous comments
- (v) Councillors who post on social media must observe the Code of Conduct. Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share. Being a Councillor does not prevent a member of the public from pursuing legal action following the publication of an untrue statement and Councillors may be held personally liable.
- (vi) Any Councillor posting, referring to themselves as a Councillor – even if it is in a personal capacity – may be considered as acting in an official capacity. When posting to social media, it should be remembered that:
 - the Councillor is an elected representative of the Council;
 - any post can affect the reputation of the Council;
 - it is the Council which is the corporate decision-making body – no Councillor can independently make decisions for the Council over social media;
 - some issues and communications are best left to the Council's official social media accounts;
 - having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations;
 - the Council cannot be involved in party political issues;
 - it is not necessary to respond or make comment on everything on social media – in fact sometimes it is better not to;
 - posts must not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

E. Treatment of anonymous letters

- (i) For reasons of natural justice and practical difficulties the Council will not deal with anonymous correspondence unless there are exceptional circumstances. The Chair and Clerk will consult on any anonymous correspondence and decide if it should be read out at a meeting.
- (ii) If members of the public would like to raise an issue with the Parish Council but wish their personal details to remain confidential (i.e. not read out or referred to at the public meeting) this should be raised with the Clerk at the time the letter is written, with details of why they believe their name should be withheld.
- (iii) A member of the public may verbally take their issue to the Clerk, or to a councillor to raise a particular issue on their behalf if they wish to personally remain anonymous.

F. Confidentiality

- (i) As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors and members of committees, sub-committees and working groups are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).
- (ii) Councillors and members of committees, sub-committees and working groups should also be careful only to 'cc' essential recipients on emails for instance to avoid use of the

'Reply to All' option if at all possible; only copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

G. Councillor correspondence to external parties

- (i) As the Clerk should be sending most of the council's correspondence from a Councillor to other bodies, it needs to be made clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the parish council.
- (ii) A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

H. Communications with Parish Council Staff

- (iii) Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the council).
- (iv) No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the council, the Chair of a committee or other meeting, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- (v) Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the parish council.
- (vi) Emails:
 - Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated;
 - Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk;
 - E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk;
 - Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.
- (vii) Meetings with the Clerk or other officers:
 - Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
 - Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer;
 - Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not driven by a personal or political agenda.