East Winch & West Bilney Parish Council Communications Policy

Background

This communications policy seeks to ensure that the Council's communications are focused and directed to ensure that key messages about the Council's work are shared with residents and other local stakeholders. The Council wishes to provide information, elicit feedback, and engage with the community.

This policy also seeks to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all officers and members involved in dealing with the media to provide guidance on how to handle media interest in a professional and objective manner.

As there are always ways in which to improve this document must be seen as work in progress.

Purpose

The purpose of this police is to ensure:

- That the Council is not exposed to legal and governance risks;
- That the reputation of the council is not adversely affected;
- That the users of the Council's social media posts are able to clearly distinguish where information provided via social media is legitimately representative of the Council.

Internal Communications

Internal communications between officers and members are just as important as those to the outside world. The Council is also subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2007 and therefore all communications of the Council can be subject to public scrutiny (with certain exemptions).

Communications via Email

Email is now the method of choice for Council communications as it saves both time and money for the Council. Therefore, all communications, including agendas for Council meetings, will be sent by email.

Councillor Email addresses

All Councillors will be provided with a Council .gov.uk email address, to comply with General Data Protection Regulations.

Councillor Communications by Email

When Councillors communicate with each other by email, they should use the "Reply All"

option, where relevant, to ensure that all Councillors are fully aware of all the information which is pertinent to them and the point under discussion.

Where an item is linked to standard Council Committee business, committee members should communicate with each other rather than all Council members. However, if it is felt that the matter is of some importance or is contentious in any way, the full Council membership will be informed of the business in hand.

This policy is not designed to preclude private and or personal communications between Councillors and/or officers in the daily running of the Council.

Agendas and supporting material to Councillors

There is a statutory requirement to issue agendas for all Council meetings a minimum of 3 clear days before the meeting. The Clerk, or delegated officer, will email the Agenda to all Council and Committee members within the statutory timescale.

Minutes of Council Meetings

A draft of each meeting's minutes will be emailed to councillors for their comments, ideally within a week of the meeting date. The clerk will upload a copy on the website in draft form and a copy will also be posted on the noticeboard. I f there are any inaccuracies in the draft minutes, these should be pointed out to the Clerk at the earliest opportunity. Minutes of previous meetings for approval at the next meeting will be available for Councillors and/or Committee members to review at the same time as the agenda for the following meeting is posted.

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 the meetings.

An officer will be present wherever possible and take notes of the meeting. The notes should be circulated to all Council members within 3 days of the meeting taking place.

Private Councillor Meetings

There should be no decision making by individuals involved where the Council is not convened. This goes against both the purpose of the Council and the requirement to be transparent to the public eye. It can also put Councillors at risk of personal liability.

Councillors are entitled and encouraged to share views with each other, however, decision making shall be left to formal Council meetings, unless a clear mandate to proceed has been minuted. Where such a mandate exists, Councillors must be aware of, and abide by, the scope of the mandate to ensure they do not inadvertently or otherwise stray beyond it.

Sub-Committee/working party Meetings

Sub-Committees e.g., finance, can meet whenever required and an agenda and minutes are to be filed, they can also make decisions and advise the full Parish Council.

Working Parties cannot make decisions but make recommendations to the full Parish Council.

Communications

Councillors or committee members who have taken on responsibility for some action which involved written or verbal communication with third parties should lodge a copy of any communication with the Clerk. This is to ensure a consistent and complete set of records are held which adequately reflect Council business and are available for reference should the need arise. These shall include:

- Letters or emails sent and received
- Notes or minutes of any meetings which may have been held or attended
- Notes or minutes of any face-to-face or telephone conversations held
- Any Media requests for comments or interviews to be advised to send in their questions to the parish clerk who will then pass on to the parish councillors for discussion.

External Communications

External communication deals with the way the Council presents itself and its workings to the general public. This includes what is communicated, how it is communicated and when it is communicated. External Communications go through the Clerk to ensure full transparency and in line with the Standing Orders.

The Council should aim to cover a number of different delivery mechanisms to achieve the maximum coverage possible to residents and other interested third parties. The list is not exhaustive, and some residents will only use limited methods due to their personal circumstances and preferences.



Public Sessions

The Council shall provide an opportunity for members of the general public to participate in Council meetings.

Public Consultations and Open Days

The Council shall provide public consultations and open days to present current issues and new projects to the community to encourage discussion within the community.

Parish Council Website

Information shall be published on the website as and when required. The website should be reviewed weekly and kept as up to date as possible to ensure residents enjoy visiting the site. Information shall include:

- Agendas of next meetings
- Approved minutes of previous Council meetings
- Annual reports
- Annual returns
- Quarterly Reviews
- Details of how to contact the Council
- Councillor details
- Council policies and procedures
- News and events

Social Media Policy

The Council has a FaceBook page:

- Managed by authorised Communications Officer under delegated authority from the Parish Council
- Posts will be:
    - Limited to factual information about the Council and its business.
    - Current and relevant

All Parish Councillors and officers are free to operate their own personal website, blog, Twitter or Facebook account. However, they must be mindful of the Parish Council's Social Media Policy.

Councillors should not include the term "councillor" (or any abbreviations) in their web address, blog address, Twitter handle or Facebook account.

Introduction

East Winch & West Bilney Parish Council is committed to making the best use of all available technology and innovation to improve the way we do business. This includes using all reasonable and cost-effective means to improve the way we communicate, reach out and interact with the different communities we serve.

'Social media' is the term given to web-based tools which allow users to interact with each other in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests online. As the name implies, social media involves the building of online communities or networks to encourage participation and engagement.

Amongst others, social media encompasses blogs, forums, social networking websites (such as Facebook, Twitter), content sharing websites (such as Flickr, YouTube) and many other online channels.

These platforms open up many new and exciting opportunities however the practical application of such technology by Parish Councils is in its infancy and there are many potential issues to consider for Parish Councillors, Parish Council Employees and the Parish Council itself.

To avoid major mistakes and turning a well meant social media experiment into a reputational disaster it is important to manage any potential risks through a common-sense approach and framework as well as proactively monitoring the development of such applications.

These guidelines aim to provide Parish Councillors and Council Employees with information to consider before participating in or developing any new social media application and to help them get the best out of the tools available whilst maintaining a safe professional environment and protecting themselves and the Parish Council.

Using Social Media to Consult and Engage

Social media is a powerful tool that can give Parishioners the opportunity to raise issues and enter in to a dialogue with the Parish Council. The Parish Council can in turn quickly clarify and elaborate issues of concern and easily feedback relevant information.

Social media is one of the few ways in which the Parish Council can directly and instantly receive feedback on policies and decisions.

Sometimes just listening is as valuable as engaging; the Parish Council does not have to respond to everything. Deciding whether to engage or not should be based on whether the Parish Council, or the Parishioner will gain something from the exchange.

If a Parish Councillor, Council Employee or the Parish Council receives praise for work done, this should be passed on. Social media is one of the best ways in which to promote the work of the Parish Council and the benefits it provides to the Community.

Social media is a fast and efficient way to communicate with for the Parish Council to communicate with Parishioners in an emergency, as well as for one-off or regular events.

Stories and discussions on social media can quickly go viral meaning they may be picked could within hours could end up on to the front pages of newspapers. The Parish Council can use social media to either reinforce or prevent those front-page headlines.

Using Social Media to be more Transparent and Accountable Introduction

Explaining what the Parish Council does, how we do it and why we do it through websites and other media is already embedded in our ethos. Social media adds a further level of transparency and accountability.

Social media allows Parishioners to have an input into decisions and to question them. We can hear directly from those affected by our decision and explain and/or defend them. Our replies can be broadcast to all Parishioners and not just the individual raising the question.

The Parish Council would naturally want to play an active part in all social media conversations but that doesn't mean we have to answer every query and question directed to us. We should not try to assist everyone who asks a question of us because in some cases it won’t be appropriate for reasons of impartiality or legality.

The Parish Council is part of a network of public service organisations many of which have digital and social media presences that users can be redirected to for information and assistance.

Personal Use of Social Media

Whether or not an individual Parish Councillor or Council Employee chooses to create or participate in an online social network, or any other form of online publishing or discussion, is his or her own business. The views and opinions expressed, however, will be their own and they are personally responsible for any content published.

A Councillor or Employee who talks about the work they do or a Council service they are associated with, should make it clear that they are speaking for themselves and not on behalf of the Council. They should use a disclaimer such as: "The views expressed here are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of East Winch & West Bilney Parish Council."

Using social media as a Parish Councillor or Employee

The relationship with social media changes as soon as you identify yourself as a Parish Councillor or Parish Council Employee, speak in any kind of professional capacity or seek to deploy social media on Parish Council business. In such circumstances there are certain responsibilities, standards of behaviour and other considerations which apply. Remember, you are the public face of the Parish Council and should participate in the same way as you would with other media or public meetings or forums.

Always remember that participation on line results in your comments being permanently available and open to being republished in other media.

You should also be aware that you may attract media interest in yourself no matter whether you are participating in an official or a personal capacity.

Parish Councillors should be aware of and follow the Parish Council's Code of Conduct.

Acting on behalf of the Parish Council as part of your job

It is important to remember that there is a human cost in using social media as an employee or any other professional capacity. Social Media is about the social connections and conversations we have with our customers, peers and friends. To gain the maximum value from these tools, you should look to foster relationships and therefore you will need to acknowledge and understand the commitment and investment of time in building and developing sustainable online relationships.

- ***Get official backing -*** Ensure you have the full approval and support of your line manager before any official deployment of social media.
- ***Be professional*** - Always remember that you are an ambassador for the organisation. Always disclose your position as a representative of the Parish Council. Anything you publish will reflect directly on the Council as a whole.
- ***Purpose and outcomes*** - Make sure you think through why you are deploying social media and what outcome you wish to achieve. For example, if you are inviting public responses then think through how you will make use of the results and how this fits in with other forms of consultation. Ask yourself is social media appropriate for this activity?
- ***Assess any risks*** - Think through any potential risks and make sure you have plans in place to manage and mitigate these.
- ***Respect your target audience*** -Think about their specific needs and be aware of any language, cultural or other sensitivities you may need to take account of.
- ***Ask and seek permission to publish*** any information, report or conversation that is not

already in the public domain. Do not cite or reference customers, partners or suppliers

without their approval.

- ***Respect copyright*** when linking to images or other online material.
- ***Stay within the legal framework*** and be aware that data protection, financial regulations apply.
- ***Monitor and evaluate*** the success of your activity.

Freedom of Information

Listed below are the circumstances where information might be considered as non-disclosable under Freedom of Information (FOI).

- ***Commercial interests*** - Information that constitutes either a trade secret or information that, if released, might prejudice the commercial interests of either the Parish Council or a third party.
- ***Information provided in confidence*** - Information that has been given to the Parish Council by a third party and to which a duty of confidence is owed. Such confidentiality may be expressly stated, such as by way of contractual confidentiality, or could be implied. The information in question must have a quality of confidence, in order to be considered confidential.
- ***Prejudice to the effective conduct of public affairs*** - Any information that if released, would prejudice the ability of the Council to perform any of its functions. This exemption requires formal sign off by the Monitoring Officer.
- ***Legal Professional Privilege*** - Information which constitutes legal advice provided by a solicitor to their client. This includes legal advice from Borough Solicitor. Information which is also derived for the principle purpose of either seeking legal advice, or entering into litigation is also covered here.
- ***Personal Information*** - Information pertaining to a living identifiable individual such as a staff member, client or even the requester.
- ***Investigations of a public authority*** - Any information that would prejudice the ability of the Parish Council to carry out an investigation. This might include investigations under a statutory instrument or could include HR investigations.
- ***Law enforcement*** - Information that if disclosed, would prejudice the capabilities of anybody to detect or prevent crime, apprehend or prosecute offenders.

Approved: August 2025

Review August 2027

EAST RUDHAM
PARISH COUNCIL