

PUDDLETOWN AREA GROUP PARISH COUNCIL

Communications Policy

Introduction

Puddletown Area Parish Council (PAPC) articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what PAPC does, whilst also enabling PAPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

The principles of these Guidelines apply to Parish Councillors and The Clerk to PAPC. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the parish council.

The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable PAPC to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities.
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the parish.
- be an effective voice of the community.
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people.
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the image or integrity of PAPC or the parish.

Who is Communicating?

Proper Officer

The Proper Officer (the Clerk) has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies. 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.

The Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

Official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letterheaded paper or using the parish council email address, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the parish council.

Where correspondence from the Clerk is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

Council letterheaded paper must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the Parish Council and must not be used to convey personal views. Council letterheaded paper is used by the Clerk and authorised staff in the day to day running of the parish council and its interests.

Councillors

Elected members may be approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. How enquiries from the public are dealt with by Councillors will reflect on PAPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk will be sought.

At no time should councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to PAPC. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in one of the following ways:

- Refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate.
- Request an item on a relevant agenda.
- Investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.

A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Parish Council or one'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. No individual Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council, a committee, sub-committee or working party.

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on council related matters reflects and does not in any way contradict the decisions and policies of PAPC, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject. Councillors must not commit the council to any action which has not previously been decided at a council meeting. PAPC as a whole will agree its statements for release to the press and social media.

Councillors assigned responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with other agencies shall keep the Clerk updated and report back to the next relevant meeting.

Council letterheaded paper may be used if requested, when preparing communications from any councillor to other agencies but must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the parish council at a meeting and must not be used to convey personal views. All written communications to third parties should be approved by the Clerk before being sent.

In cases where a response to communication needs to be sent urgently and cannot wait until a meeting, councillors should liaise with the Clerk to agree an appropriate response. This must not commit the council to any action that has not already been resolved at a meeting and must not imply liability or contradict the decisions and policies of PAPC.

Good Practice

All individuals communicating on behalf of PAPC must be aware that every piece of communication reflects on the reputation of PAPC in the community. All communication should be courteous and professional.

Councillors and staff must ensure that any electronic device which they use to access an email address used for PAPC business is secured (or that the email account is secured) using a password or PIN and that this is not shared with any other person. All such devices must have suitable anti-viral software running.

Emails received by the Council's Proper Officer, staff or Members may be disclosed following a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or following a subject access request under the Data Protection Act 1998, under the General Data Protection Regulation or in the course of legal proceedings.

The Media

All media enquiries should be directed to the Parish Clerk.

All media comment must accurately reflect PAPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.

All decisions of PAPC made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media.

Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement' to the media must clearly inform the media:

- that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of PAPC;
- that other councillors may hold a different view;

- that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by P APC.

Online Presence

The Clerk will ensure that the P APC website is regularly updated and that all statutory information is displayed. All online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

Any inaccurate information or otherwise concerning online content which relates in any way to the parish council should be reported to the Clerk.

The Clerk may use social media in order to post news and events relating to the work of P APC or the community. This may include links to the P APC website.

When using social media (including email) parish councillors and council staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative. Parish councillors and council staff must not:

- hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- present personal opinions as that of the council
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the council
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- publish personal data of individuals without permission
- publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- post any information that infringes copyright of others
- post any information that may be deemed libel
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate parish councillors, council staff or residents should report them to the Clerk of the Council.

This Policy will be reviewed annually and can be updated at any time by resolution at a full council meeting. Adopted and Approved at the Meeting of Puddletown Area Group Parish Council on 08/10/2019.
To be reviewed by 08/10/2020