

DOWNTON  
PARISH COUNCIL



## **Communications & Public Relations Policy & Procedure**

*This Policy sets out the Parish Council's policy on the ways  
In which it communicates as an organisation  
with the Press and Public*

**Adopted June 2019**

**Minute 52.19**

## 1. Introduction

Downton Parish Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders and to do this it is vital that a communications & public relations policy and procedure is developed.

- 1.1. This procedure should be read in conjunction with the Parish Council's standing orders and code of conduct. The Council's Standing order 21 states:

*'Requests from the press or other media for an oral or written comment or statement from the council, its councillors or staff shall be handled in accordance with the council's policy in respect of dealing with the Press and/or other media.'*

- 1.2. The Parish Council recognises its responsibility to help communicate accurate and timely information to the Press and public in a professional manner. Proper co-ordination will ensure that messages put out by the Parish Council are consistent and accurate.
- 1.3. The Parish Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communication. The overall aim is that Council communications should be a two-way process:
- to give people the information to understand accurately what the Council does, so that they can make informed decisions; and
  - to get information from residents and stakeholders so that the Council can understand their needs.
- 1.4. The purpose of the Parish Council's Communications and PR Policy and Procedure is to ensure its members and staff effectively communicate this information to promote the openness and transparency of the Council.
- 1.5. The Parish Council also recognises the distinction between communication from 'the Parish Council', and communication from individuals as 'councillors'.
- 1.6. The communication of information may be viewed in four main mediums; print, electronic, media relations, and public relations. However, communication with the Press and public takes place every day on a very basic level, i.e. desk enquiries, social media enquiries, speaking to residents in the street.
- 1.7. The Parish Council respects freedom of speech and this procedure is not intended to restrain this.
- 1.8. Local councils and their representatives are governed by national legislation and codes of practice. The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. Communications activity must adhere to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011, which provides guidance on the content, style,

distribution and cost of local authority publicity. This code is statutory guidance and therefore councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

## **2. Who should the Council be communicating with?**

The Council's audiences are wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents
- Parish Council staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people
- The media
- Wiltshire Council (unitary authority)
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- MPs
- Other public sector organizations (police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the Parish

## **3. The Council's aims:**

The Council's communications work will:

- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence levels
- raise awareness of services provided by the Council
- raise the profile of Downton as a parish
- support elected members in their role as community leaders
- 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 the Council

The Council's vision for its communications work is that residents will:

- know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect
- feel confident and satisfied with the services and their costs
- understand how to get involved with, or influence, the work of the Council

In addition, visitors to the parish will:

- see Downton as a thriving destination in which to live, work and play

## **4. Handling General Requests**

- 4.1. All staff and councillors are responsible for communicating basic and routine information to the Press and public in relation to their specific job duties or role within the Council and its committees.
- 4.2. Requests for information outside of the remit of an individual's responsibilities should be referred to the Clerk, Chair or Vice-Chair.

## **5. Responding to media enquiries**

- 5.1. The Parish Council respects the media's role in delivering information to the public and responses will be given in recognition of deadlines, which are crucial to effective media relations.
- 5.2. The media are crucially important in conveying information to the community, so the Parish Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations at all times.
- 5.3. The media work on behalf of the local community to hold the Parish Council to account for its policies and actions, and it is therefore important that they have access to the officer and members in order to provide background information to help them in this role.
- 5.4. Requests for interviews, information or photographs from the media should be referred initially to the Clerk, or in their absence, to the Chair.
- 5.5. Any response will be collated in conjunction with the Clerk. Where possible, responses will be given by the Chair, and in their absence the Vice-Chair and then the relevant Committee chair.
- 5.6. Official statements from the Parish Council must be issued on a document bearing the Council's logo, include an appropriate title, be dated and contain the details of the person to contact for further information.
- 5.7. Statements made must reflect the minuted opinion of the Parish Council, where applicable.
- 5.8. Councillors may be approached directly by the media and can provide responses, making it clear that the views given are their own and not necessarily those of the Parish Council. Members should not claim to be commenting on behalf of the Parish Council.
- 5.9. The Parish Council recognises that councillors have private lives and may be approached by the media in relation to their roles outside of the Council. In this instance, members must make it clear that they are not commenting as an elected councillor or on behalf of the Parish Council.
- 5.10. Requests to take photographs of councillors or staff in relation to Council business must be agreed by the individual and in the case of staff, by their line manager.
- 5.11. There is no out-of-hours media relations service, although councillors can be contacted outside of normal office hours as their contact details are available in the public domain. In extreme circumstances, e.g. if the circumstances of the request will have an impact before the timescale allowed by the next available working hours, the Chair and Clerk should be contacted to liaise with the media if necessary.

- 5.12. The Parish Council should not pass comment on anonymous allegations or allegations about individual councillors or staff.
- 5.13. The Parish Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.
- 5.14. Members and staff must alert the Clerk as soon as a potentially positive or negative issue which may attract media interest becomes known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

## **6. Issuing news releases**

- 6.1. As well as responding to media requests, the Parish Council will pro-actively issue news releases and distribute them to the relevant media.
- 6.2. Press releases must be issued on a document bearing the Parish Council's logo, include an appropriate title, be dated and contain the details of the person to contact for further information.
- 6.3. Press releases wherever possible will include a quote from a councillor.
- 6.4. Releases will not publicise the activities of individual councillors or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.
- 6.5. Photographs may be issued with the news releases and captions must be included in the release. If photographs include councillors or staff, clause 3.10 will apply.
- 6.6. Press releases will be sent by email to the relevant media, displayed on the Parish Council website, on the Council's noticeboards and on the Council's social media sites.
- 6.7. The Clerk will be responsible for developing news releases in conjunction with the relevant councillor.
- 6.8. Letters to the editor of a newspaper do not qualify as press releases and caution is advised when submitting a letter of this kind. If submitted by a councillor, it should state that they are acting as an individual and not as a councillor. It may be appropriate for the Parish Council to submit a letter on occasions, such as correcting factual errors. These letters should be factual and brief and should be signed by the Chair or the Clerk only.
- 6.9. Other ways to correct inaccurate reporting about the Parish Council include issuing a separate news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor, or legal advice and any such action should be agreed in advance with the Clerk and/or the Chair.
- 6.10. Officers and members have a responsibility to identify newsworthy items and seek opportunities where it may be beneficial to issue a press release.

## **7. Media attendance at Parish Council meetings**

- 7.1. Local media outlets will be provided on request with the agendas, reports and minutes of meetings, prior to them taking place, as required by the Local Government Act 1972.
- 7.2. The Press will be provided with reasonable facilities, i.e. seating and a desk, at meetings or part of a meeting at which they are entitled to be present, as outlined in standing order 3.m.
- 7.3. The photographing, recording, broadcasting or transmitting the proceedings of meetings by the media is outlined in standing order 3.L.

## **8. Parish Council website**

- 8.1. The Council's website [www.downtonparishcouncil.gov.uk](http://www.downtonparishcouncil.gov.uk) should provide an informative online resource for residents and visitors, giving information about the Council, the parish, councillors and staff, services provided by the Council, dates of meetings, the local community, news, links to useful websites, minutes and agendas, and a search facility.
- 8.2. Information on the website should be accurate and kept up-to-date.
- 8.3. Press releases and Council notices should be displayed in the news section of the website.

## **9. Council column**

- 9.1. The Council will produce a monthly column for the local Parish News, produced by St Laurence's Church, providing residents with a summary of the minutes of most recent Full Council Meeting.
- 9.2. The Council will produce an article for the bi-monthly edition of the InDownton Newsletter providing interesting and informative news about the Council, its members and any community issues which are linked to the Council.
- 9.3. The article will be produced by the Clerk or appropriate Councillor. Ideas for inclusion in the article can be submitted to the Clerk by councillors and staff.

## **10. Council noticeboards**

- 10.1. Priority is given on the Council's noticeboards to official Council documents, such as agendas, public notices, election information and legal issues affecting the Council.
- 10.2. Where possible, the Council will display posters and information for community related issues.

## **11. Carry out regular consultation**

- 11.1. The Council is committed to consulting local taxpayers, service users, local businesses and its own staff and members to identify ways in which it can improve the services it provides.
- 11.2. Consultation is a key part in a communications strategy as it is a two-way exchange of views between local people and the Council. This will help the Council to make decisions and allow to tell people about why it provides services in the way it does.
- 11.3. To date and currently, most of the Council's consultation is by way of questionnaires, public meetings, public exhibitions and members' interaction with the public. However, occasional surveys are carried out online via Facebook.

## **12. Publicity in Election Periods**

- 12.1. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, the Council is subject to rules which impact on how it can communicate with the public.
- 12.2. During this period, Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way which identifies them with individual members or groups of members. This ensures that no individual councillor gains an unfair advantage by appearing in an official publicity.
- 12.3. In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted.

## **13. Social Media**

- 13.1. The use of digital and social media and electronic communication provides the Parish Council with the opportunity to communicate with people immediately, in real time and in a way which improves further the communications between the Council and residents, businesses and organisations it works with and serves.
- 13.2. The Council has a website, Facebook page, Twitter account and uses email to communicate with residents and others. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications.
- 13.3. The Council Facebook page and Twitter account aims to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within the parish and promote the community in a positive way and all councillors and staff must have this aim in mind when posting information.

## **14. Criteria for the use of social media**

14.1. Communications from the Council will 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, for which we do not own the copyright;
- Not contain any personal information;
- If it is official Council business it will be moderated by either the Clerk to the Council or the administrators of the page;
- Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

14.2. In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, it asks that the public adhere to the following guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official Council posts, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page or Twitter site for commercial purposes or to advertise, market or sell products.
- The site is not monitored 24/7 and the Council will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, it will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. It should not include personal/private information in social media posts to the Council.

14.3. Sending a message/post via Facebook or Twitter will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and it will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, it is expected that users make direct contact with the Council's Clerk and/or

members of the Council by pressing the contact button on the Facebook page which is linked directly to the Council's 'contact us' page on its website, or by emailing the Clerk on [clerk@downtonparishcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:clerk@downtonparishcouncil.gov.uk).

14.4. The Council retains the right to remove comments or content which includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements.
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be either to ignore, inform the sender of its policy or to send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given the limited resources available.

Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page.

The Council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

## **15. Parish Council email**

15.1. The Clerk of the Council has their own Council email address. The account is monitored from 10 am to 3 pm, Monday to Friday, and the Council aims to reply to all questions sent as soon as possible. An 'out of office' message will be used when appropriate.

15.2. The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on the text of any relevant emails to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk. All emails requiring data to be passed on will be followed up with a Data consent form for completion before any action is taken.

15.3. Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners and to copy these to the Clerk. In accordance with the Council's GDPR policies and privacy notice, councillors should not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

## **16. SMS (texting) and Video Conferencing e.g. Skype**

This policy and procedure will apply to all members and the Clerk when using SMS and video conferencing modes of communication.

## **17. Evaluation**

The Council will develop a process for evaluating its communications and engagement to enable it to understand whether the activities it undertakes are effective.