

# Uffington Parish Council

## Communications Policy and Procedures

### Introduction

The way in which Uffington Parish Council ('the Council') communicates, both internally, and externally is vital to its work and the decisions it takes. An open and constructive two-way dialogue is a key requirement for influencing and developing services, identifying needs and measuring satisfaction. The effective provision and dissemination of information and the management of news and media relations is also essential.

This document does not set out to be comprehensive but aims to inform Councillors ('Cllrs') and employees of the Council's Communications Policy and Procedures, both internally within the Council and externally with the parish and local community, with other local authority / government bodies, the press and media and suppliers.

Notes:

1. The Council has a number of related Policies and Procedures, all of which are available on the Council website, which cover the relevant and specific aspects of communications. These include but are not limited to: Standing Orders, Code of Conduct, Information Security policy, GDPR Data Protection policy, Complaints procedure, Bias in Decision Making policy, and Financial Regulations.
2. The term 'media' above encompasses many different organisations which communicate information to a wide audience and, whilst not exhaustive, includes the following: radio, television, Internet, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, and posters.
3. It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce overly strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications amongst Cllrs and the Clerk and between Cllrs/Clerk and third parties, when acting in an official capacity.

### Policy Aims and Objectives

The aim of this policy is to make Council communications an effective two-way process in order to provide residents with timely information needed to understand accurately what the Council does and enabling the Council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners. The Council's principal policy objectives in all its communications are to:

- Be open and transparent in all its communications
- Communicate in a timely manner through the most appropriate and cost-effective means
- Encourage feedback from residents and partners, to enable the Council to represent the parish effectively
- Maintain and enhance the reputation of the Council and the parish.

### General Communications Principles

- Do not include any content which is unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, offensive, discriminatory, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive
- Do not make negative comments about any individual, including members of the public, other Cllrs or business suppliers
- Do not promote political parties or publicise personal information

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- When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed
- Keep all communications relevant and concise
- Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary
- Always write emails as if they are permanent because even when they have been deleted, they can often still be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court, the Information Commissioner or through a Freedom of Information Request
- Remember that information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive information that needs to be respected
- Always respect the privacy of others, particularly regarding personal and sensitive information.

## **Methods of communication**

### **Internal Communications (with residents of Uffington and other local communities)**

The Council will:

- Publish the names and contact information of all Cllrs on the website, the notice board and in all editions of the Courier
- Ensure that it communicates with residents in a timely and effective manner and will inform and consult them about all significant matters which affect the Parish
- Hold regular Council meetings
- Use face-to-face, digital, telephone and paper methods of communication as appropriate, particularly where it is necessary to ensure that those without electronic means are included.

The most common methods of internal communication used by the Council are:

- Council meetings
  - These meetings are the principle decision-making forum for the Council and at which statutory business is conducted
  - The Council will hold regular, usually monthly, meetings, the dates and timings of which are published in the website and the Courier. The agenda will be published on the website and the notice board at least three clear days in advance of the meeting
  - All meetings are open to the public and will include an 'open forum' at which the public may raise any issues. Members of the public are not permitted to contribute to agenda items outside of the open forum unless permission is granted by the Chair or unless they have requested to speak in advance. It is possible for the Council to decide that a meeting or particular item should be discussed in a closed session
  - Correspondence for all meetings must be addressed to the Clerk. This will ensure that the matter is recorded and passed to the Council for their attention at the next meeting. If a parishioner wishes a subject to be raised, the Clerk must be notified at least seven days before the publication of the agenda. The Clerk will decide whether it is appropriate for discussion.
- The Parish Assembly is a mandatory meeting held between 1 April and 30 June annually (usually in April). This is a meeting of the Parish and not the Council. Electors can contribute to the agenda and these meetings can celebrate local activities and debate current issues in the community

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- The Council Annual General Meeting (AGM) must be held in May. This is the meeting at which the Chair, Vice-Chair and Committees are elected, and at which annual Council matters are discussed
- Extraordinary meetings (including Emergency or Planning Committee meetings) may be convened from time to time in unusual circumstances or where a matter requires urgent attention
- Other public meetings may be held if required for a specific purpose
- Email for the exchange of information and comments
- Offer to discuss potential planning applications
- Exploit technology to provide alternative solutions for the future where both appropriate and permitted by relevant legislation, e.g., the use of video conferencing, or software-based service such as Zoom, if face-to-face public meetings are not possible.

## External Communication

The most common methods of external communication used by the Council are:

- Village web site ([www.uffington.net](http://www.uffington.net)). The website is open to all and contains a lot of information (current and historic) about:
  - The Council
  - Local services and businesses
  - Many other entities and organisations in the village
  - The website is kept up-to-date by a nominated Cllr and the Clerk
- The Courier. The Courier is published quarterly by the Council and is distributed free of charge to all households in Uffington, Baulking and Woolstone ('UBW'). The Courier contains:
  - A section by the Council with a record of current, future and historic activities and projects
  - Reports and articles contributed by other organisations and individuals in the village
  - A number of advertisements by local traders
- Welcome Note. The Welcome Note is distributed to all newcomers moving into Uffington, with a copy of the latest Courier. It contains information on the four Churches of the Uffington Benefice, and on local doctors and vets' surgeries and tradesmen
- The Council noticeboard at Uffington Post Office and Stores displays agendas and minutes of Council meetings along with a range of other information of interest to residents
- Email Newsletter. A weekly newsletter containing matters of local, topical interest is sent to all those who have requested to be on the distribution
- Email. All Cllrs are provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business
- Post
- Telephone
- Social Media. Although not sponsored by the Council, many local communications, such as the weekly Email Newsletter, are shared on the UBW Facebook page by village volunteers.

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## Procedures

The purpose of these procedures is to inform Cllrs and employees of how communications should take place in accordance with the Council's policy. These procedures can be broken into two distinct groups:

- Procedures used by the Cllrs and the Clerk amongst themselves internally

And

- Procedures used to communicate externally with the local community, with other local authority / government bodies, the press and media and suppliers.

## Internal Procedures

The procedures to be used by the Council are laid down in the Local Government Act of 1972. They are encapsulated in a number of Council policies and procedures all of which are available on the Council website. These include:

- Cllrs Code of Conduct
- Guidance on Bias in Decision Making
- Financial Regulations
- Standing Orders.

There are also other policies which cover relevant everyday aspects of local government and other government legislation at parish level.

## External Procedures

### **Communications with local authorities, the media, suppliers**

**Incoming Correspondence.** The point of contact for the Council is the Clerk, to whom all correspondence for the Council should be addressed. The Clerk is designated as the 'Proper Officer' and has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication within the Council, and with members of the community and external bodies. All correspondence of relevance to the Council or of general interest locally should be shared initially with the Chair, or directly with all Cllrs. Any official correspondence from external agencies sent to an individual Cllr should be forwarded immediately to the Clerk for distribution as necessary.

### **Outgoing Correspondence**

- All official external correspondence should be sent only by the Clerk or the Chair in the name of the Council using council letter headed paper or an appropriate signature block on an e-mail, to make it quite clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Council. All such communications with the public on Council related matters, including press releases, will reflect the decisions and policies of the Council; should this not be clear in any particular case, the matter should be referred back to the Council for a decision
- Cllrs should NOT make contractual arrangements directly with companies/individuals with which the Council has a contractual relationship: this can only be done by the Clerk
- The Clerk is the first point of contact for the media. All approaches from the media should be referred to the Clerk. Individual Cllrs are not permitted to issue media

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releases on behalf of the Council. The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. The Clerk, in consultation with the Parish Chair, is responsible for issuing formal press releases.

## **Approaches by members of the community**

Cllrs will be approached regularly by members of the community. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter, e-mail or via social media, and Cllrs must remember that when dealing with Council business they are *always* a Cllr and should not express personal opinions. When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, Cllrs should seek the guidance of the Chair or Clerk. All communications with the public on council related matters must reflect the decisions and policies of the Council.

At no time should Cllrs make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate it. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to:

- Refer the matter to the Clerk to deal with it as appropriate
- Request an item on the agenda of a future meeting
- Research a new project personally, having sought the guidance of the Clerk or Chair
- If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a Cllr, the matter should be referred to the Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain.

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