



COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA POLICY

Abstract

This policy sets out the Lapford Parish Council's methodology and procedures for both its internal and external communications in order to establish clear, easy-to-use channels of communication between the Council and the public, fellow Councillors, the Clerk, other agencies and the media

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Review Cycle

Every four years at the Annual Meeting of the Council after the election of the parish councillors or in response to new or amended statutory requirements. Next review due May 2023.

Legislation and Regulation

- Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011
- Data Protection Act 2018
- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Local Government Act 1972
- Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014
- Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities 2014
- Lapford Parish Council's related documents:
 - Freedom of Information Policy
 - Notice for recording, filming and broadcasting council meetings
 - Protocol for recording, filming and broadcasting council meetings
 - Publication Scheme
 - Website Management Policy

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1. INTRODUCTION

This policy sets out the Lapford Parish Council's (the Council) methodology and procedures for both its internal and external communications in order to establish clear, easy-to-use channels of communication between the Council and the public, fellow councillors, the Clerk, other agencies and the media.

The Council aims to provide information on important matters affecting the community and to encourage informed comment from interested individuals and groups.

Each councillor has a duty to represent, without bias, the interests of the whole community. They are available to help parishioners with regard to matters relating to the parish of Lapford. However, an individual councillor cannot respond to enquiries outside of Council meetings other than to acknowledge such an enquiry. Neither can an individual councillor, including the Chairman, make a decision or respond on behalf of the Council.

2. PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

- 2.1 The point of contact for Lapford Parish Council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Council should be addressed.
- 2.2 Information for Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk.
- 2.3 All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using either Council letter headed paper or by email with an auto-signature showing the Council's contact information, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Council.
- 2.4 The Clerk will respond to correspondence on behalf of the Council unless she thinks it needs discussion at a future Council meeting. In such instances, she will respond to the correspondence following the Council meeting.
- 2.5 For reasons of computer security and virus protection, anonymous emails, those with no subject in the title and those with suspicious senders' email addresses may not be opened or actioned. Email attachments will not be opened unless the Clerk is expecting the information.
- 2.6 The Council reserves the right to not respond to any correspondents that are taking up a disproportionate amount of the Clerk's time. Advice will be sought upon receipt of vexatious communications and acted upon accordingly.
- 2.7 No individual councillor or the Clerk should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Council, a committee, sub-committee or working party. In particular, councillors and the Clerk do not have a right to obtain confidential information or documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.
- 2.8 Where correspondence from the Clerk to an individual is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.
- 2.9 Correspondence from the Clerk marked "Confidential" must be treated as such and not be disclosed to anyone.

3. COUNCILLOR CORRESPONDENCE WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES

- 3.1 Councillors will be regularly approached by members of the community. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter, e-mail or via social media. Councillors should forward any correspondence received to the Clerk. When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, councillors should seek the guidance of the Clerk.

- 3.2 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. 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 a relevant agenda; or
 - Investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Clerk.
- 3.3 If councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's complaints procedure or via a Council agenda item.
- 3.4 Councillors must ensure that any and all communication with the public on Council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of the Council regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject.
- 3.5 In exceptional circumstances, it may be appropriate for a councillor to issue correspondence in their own name. In such instances, it needs to be made clear that such correspondence is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Council.
- 3.6 A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council, or a councillor's role within it, should be copied to the Clerk, and it should be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk", so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.
- 3.7 No individual councillor should communicate direct with companies or individuals with which the Council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries should be through the Clerk.
- 3.8 If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a councillor, the matter should be referred to the Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain.

4. AGENDA ITEMS FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS, COMMITTEES & WORKING GROUPS

- 4.1 Agendas 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.
- 4.2 Communications between councillors regarding agenda items should have regard to the potential issue of pre-determination. While the Localism Act 2011 makes it clear that it is perfectly acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and information, councillors should ensure they keep an open mind and avoid comments that might give the perception of having reached a conclusion.
- 4.3 If a parishioner wishes a matter to be raised, and it is appropriate for discussion at a council meeting, then the Clerk will have to be notified four clear working days before publication of the agenda.
- 4.4 Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- 4.5 Where the Clerk or a councillor wishes fellow councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

5. COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE MEDIA & PUBLIC

- 5.1 The Chairman, Vice Chairman or Clerk are the main point of contact for the media and approaches from the media should be referred to the Chairman, Vice Chairman or Clerk. The term "media" includes many different forms of communicating a message to a wider

audience, and includes broadcast media, the Internet, and a wide range of printed media, including newspapers, magazines, local broadcasters and posters.

- 5.2 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. It is the responsibility of the councillors and the Clerk to identify opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 5.3 Press releases and statements must reflect the Council's views and they will normally be restricted to matters that have been debated and agreed by the Council.
- 5.4 Any councillor or the Clerk may draft a formal press release or statement. However, they must all be issued by the Clerk following agreement with the Chairman or Vice Chairman, in order to ensure that the principles outlined in this Policy are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release or statement can be monitored.
- 5.5 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.
- 5.6 There are a number of personal privacy issues for councillors and the Clerk that must be handled carefully and sensitively in accordance with the Council's policies on Freedom of Information and Data Protection. These issues include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number, disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.
- 5.7 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request and the media are encouraged to attend council meetings and the Council should make appropriate space available.
- 5.8 The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 allows the filming, photography and/or recording of council proceedings by the press or public. Where the media will be filming or recording council or committee proceedings, the Clerk should be contacted prior to the particular meeting to ensure reasonable arrangements can be made. No oral report or verbal running commentary is permitted during the meeting.
- 5.9 Where it is appropriate for a councillor to represent the Council, the Chairman or Vice Chairman shall be authorised to act as the official spokesperson for the Council.
- 5.10 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 media should make it clear that any views they express are personal and not necessarily those of the Council.
- 5.11 Unless a councillor is absolutely certain that they are reporting the view of the Council, i.e. if the matter has been discussed at a council meeting, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.
- 5.12 If councillors choose to express their own opinions on Council matters, they must make it clear that the views put forward are their personal opinions and are not representative of Council policy.
- 5.13 Letters or articles representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Clerk if they have been specifically approved by Council or cleared by the Chairman and/or Vice Chairman.
- 5.14 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers and magazines. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in

letters submitted by other correspondents. However, such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks.

- 5.15 Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.
- 5.16 Councillors and the Clerk must always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media and should take care not to misrepresent and/or bring the Council into disrepute.
- 5.17 In the restricted period before an election, commonly known as “purdah”, Council resources should not be used on publicising individual councillors unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the Council. The Council will not quote any councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for election. The only exception to this, as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011, is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the Council. In this situation, councillors holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

6. COMMUNICATIONS WITH PARISH COUNCIL STAFF

- 6.2 Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so, e.g. where three or more councillors sit as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the Council.
- 6.1 No individual councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chairman of the Council or the Chair of a committee or other meeting, may give instructions to the Clerk which are inconsistent or conflict with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- 6.3 Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Council.
- 6.4 The Clerk will monitor the Council’s emails regularly and at least once a week. Immediate replies should not be expected from the Clerk, but the Clerk will try to respond in a timely manner.
- 6.5 For urgent matters, the Clerk should be contacted by text, as well as by email.
- 6.6 Councillors should acknowledge their emails and provide a response when requested to do so.
- 6.7 Due to the Clerk’s part-time hours, whenever possible, an appointment should be made to meet with the Clerk and meetings should be relevant to legitimate council business.

7. MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

7.1 Council Website

- The address of the Council website is www.lapfordpc.btck.co.uk
- In order to comply with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities 2014, the following documents will be published annually:
 - All items of expenditure above £100;
 - End of year accounts, i.e. Annual Accounting Statements;
 - Annual Governance Statement;
 - Annual Internal Audit Report;
 - List of councillors’ responsibilities;
 - Details of public land and building assets;

- Agendas and papers of formal council meetings will be published at least three clear days before the meeting to which they relate is taking place; and
- Draft minutes of council meetings will be published no later than one month after the meeting has taken place.
- To comply with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Council's Freedom of Information Policy states that a variety of documents will be routinely published on the website as set out in the Council's Publication Scheme, e.g. the contact details for the Clerk and councillors and the Council's policies.
- Other information, such as notices of public consultations on local services or planning applications, will be published as appropriate.
- The Council website is updated regularly in accordance with the Council's Website Management Policy.

7.2 Council Notice Board

- The Council Notice Board is located in the Orchard Centre.
- Contact details for the Clerk and details of the Council's website are permanently displayed on the notice board.
- The agenda for formal Council meetings will be displayed at least three clear working days in advance of the meeting.
- The draft minutes of the previous meeting will be displayed as soon as is reasonably practicable after the meeting.
- Any statutory notices and items of interest will be displayed when appropriate.
- Due to limited space, more comprehensive information will be made available on the Council's website.

7.3 Council Meetings

- The Council generally meets at 7:30pm on the first Tuesday of the month. Meetings are usually held in The Orchard Centre, Orchard Way, Lapford, EX17 6PZ. Any variations to meeting times, dates or location will be published on the Council's website and notice board.
- At the beginning of every council meeting, there is a 20-minute public participation session allowing members of the public to make representations and present their views.
- The Annual Parish Meeting is held between 1st March and 1st June. It provides parishioners with a summary of the activities of the Council over the previous year and the opportunity to debate local issues and celebrate local events and activities.

7.4 Local Magazine – The Lapford Lookout

Articles and notices are regularly published in the local magazine, including:

- The contact details for the Clerk and councillors;
- Details of forthcoming meetings;
- The highlights of the formal council meetings; and
- Council notices, e.g. tenders for grass cutting or litter picking events, statutory notices and items of interest will be published when appropriate.

7.5 Social Networking

- At present, the Council does not use social media, including Facebook and Twitter, but if the Council decides to do so in the future, the service will be widely advertised to the public.
- When using social media, councillors should not represent their personal views as being the view or the policies of the Council, nor should they represent their views as being those of other councillors unless those councillors have given their express permission.