Walton Parish Council

Communications Policy [Reviewed: Autumn 2023]

1. Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and to provide guidelines.
Walton Parish Council gives voice to and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the community and encourages comments 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 the parish council does, whilst also enabling the council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.
It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communication between council members and with third parties.
The principles of these guidelines apply to Parish Councillors and the Clerk to Walton Parish Council. The Clerk and Councillors alike are responsible for ensuring compliance with this policy.
Councillors are reminded that they should act in accordance with the code of conduct of Walton Parish Council

2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communication will enable Walton Parish Council 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, the district and region.
• be an effective voice of the community
• maintain and enhance the reputation of Walton Parish Council
• proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the integrity of Walton Parish Council

3. Communication by the Clerk – the proper officer of the council

The Proper Officer (the Clerk) has overall responsibility for 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. Councillors should forward any correspondence received for the parish council to the Clerk.
The Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.
All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letterheaded paper, or the official council email address, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity.
Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.
Council letterheaded paper and email address must only be used for communications relating to the Parish Council and must not be used to convey personal views. The Council letterheaded paper and email address is used by the Clerk in the day to day running of the Parish Council and its interests.
The Clerk will be required to communicate both verbally and in writing on a regular basis with the community as part of their duties, using the council email address with which they have been provided. It is imperative that such communication is handled with courtesy and professionalism.

4. Communication by Councillors

Elected members will be regularly 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 Walton Parish Council. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email, or via social media.
When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk will be sought.
No individual Parish Councillor should communicate directly with companies / individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries should be made through the Clerk.
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.
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 manners of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to Walton parish council. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- request an item be added to an agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on council-related matters reflects the decisions and policies of Walton Parish Council, regardless of the Councillor's individual views on any subject.
Councillors provided with a council email address should use that address only for the purpose of conducting council business.
Council letterheaded paper and email address may be used by the Clerk when preparing communications from any Councillor if requested, but must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the parish council and must not be used to convey personal views.
Emails received by the Council's Proper Officer, or Councillors, 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.

5. Communication at, and regarding, Parish Council Meetings

Walton Parish Council usually meets on the second Friday of every month. Meetings start at 7pm. There is time allocated for a public session on the agenda of each meeting and residents may be invited to speak at other times at the discretion of the Chairman of the Council.
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.
Communications between Councillors regarding agenda items should have regard to the potential issue of pre-determination. While it is perfectly acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and information, Councillors should ensure they retain an open mind and avoid comments that might give the perception of having reached a conclusion.
Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda. Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.
Correspondence from the Clerk marked "Confidential" must be treated as such and not be disclosed to anyone
Councillors should ensure that they have read and understand any documents for discussion and come to meetings able to make an informed decision or identify information that is required in order for them to do so.
An initial draft of the minutes shall be produced by the Clerk and issued to all Councillors by email and / or hardcopy for review. Any amendments shall be made and a subsequent draft issued for consideration as an accurate record at the next monthly parish council meeting.
The Agenda and Minutes of meetings are published on the council website with agendas also being placed on the village noticeboards. When requested, copies of agendas may also be provided to residents and other interested parties by email.

Councillors who have taken on responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall advise the Clerk and report back to the next parish council meeting on such communication.

6. General Principles

When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed.

- Keep the 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 or the Information Commissioner.
- Internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.
- Information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive in nature, this needs to be respected.
- Always respect the privacy of others.
- Do not write anything in communications that might be construed as offensive or discriminatory.
- Do not make negative comments about an individual, including members of the public, Councillors, the clerk, or business suppliers.
- Ensure that it is clear in what capacity you are writing and copy in any appropriate Councillor.

7. Communications between Parish Councillors and the Clerk

Individual Councillors must not give instructions to the Clerk, unless authorised to do by the Parish Council.
No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the council, may give instructions to the Clerk which are inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the parish council.
E-mails:

- Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk.
- Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk.
- E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk.
- Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

Meetings with the Clerk

- Wherever possible an appointment should be made.
- meetings should be relevant to the work of the officer.
- Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not driven by a personal agenda.

8. Contact with the Media

The Clerk is the first point of contact for the media. Approaches from the media should be referred to Parish Clerk. Individual Councillors are not permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish 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 Chairman, is responsible for issuing formal press releases on behalf of the Council.
Proactive media releases may be issued to promote a decision or work of the Parish Council.
Reactive press releases may be prepared and issued by the Clerk in liaison with the Chairman, in response to a specific question or as a rebuttal to an article already published. Such statements should be dealt with in a timely manner.
If Members choose to express their own opinions on Council matters, they must make clear that the views put forward are those of the individual Member and not representative of Council policy. They should also state that other Councillors may hold different opinions and that the matter may still need to be discussed and/or resolved by the parish council

Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.
Letters or articles representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Parish Clerk unless such letters or articles been specifically approved for release by individual Councillors at a parish council meeting.
Councillors and the Clerk should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council

9. Social Media

Introduction
The use of social media has become increasingly popular, with websites that encourage user participation and user-generated content. This policy aims to provide guidelines for the appropriate use of social media by Councillors and council staff of the Walton Parish Council. It also covers the management of public comments on community social media sites.
How social media will be used by the council.
Social media will be utilised by the Walton Parish Council for a variety of purposes, including engaging with individuals and communities, supporting local democracy, distributing information from council notices and meetings, promoting events and activities, sharing local news, providing information about services and events, supporting community cohesion, gathering insights from residents, promoting events and tourism, advertising vacancies, and sharing relevant information from partners and community groups.
Who is covered by this policy.
This policy applies to elected and co-opted Parish Councillors, council staff, and volunteers. It is expected that all individuals covered by this policy comply with its guidelines at all times to protect the council's reputation, privacy, confidentiality, and interests. Each individual is responsible for their online behaviour, both in a council and personal capacity.
Code of Practice.
When using social media, Councillors and staff will adhere to their existing code of conduct and must be mindful of the information they post, maintaining a respectful and informative tone in their comments. They should not post anything they wouldn't be willing to say in writing or in person. Guidelines include being responsible and respectful, respecting the privacy of others, keeping comments informative and respectful, seeking permission to publish original photos or videos, disclosing their identity and affiliation to the council, being objective and accurate, and checking spelling and grammar.
There are also restrictions in place, such as not giving out personal data of others, not presenting personal opinions as that of the council, not posting false or misleading statements, refraining from derogatory or offensive comments, not engaging in personal attacks or hostile communications, not publishing photographs or videos of minors without parental permission, avoiding libellous or obscene content, complying with laws and regulations, and not bringing the council into disrepute.
Managing Social Media Accounts.
The Parish Clerk and the communications committee are responsible for posting content on the council's website and social media pages. A moderator, usually the Parish Clerk, will monitor and moderate the council's social media output to ensure compliance with the policy. The moderator has the authority to remove any inflammatory, defamatory, or libellous posts and can block or ban individuals or companies from accessing the council's social media pages.
Members of the public are generally allowed to post on the council's social media pages as long as their comments are responsible, respectful, objective, balanced, informative, and accurate. However, posts that include personal data, misleading statements, inflammatory or offensive remarks, derogatory or defamatory comments, or violate laws or regulations may be deleted, and the account holder may be blocked.
The Parish Clerk and the communications committee are also responsible for ensuring the correct security settings are in place on the social media sites used by the council, and Councillors may assist in sharing information as long as they adhere to this policy. No changes to social media account details can be made without permission from the Parish Clerk or the full council.

10. Other Methods of Communication

Noticeboards

The village noticeboards will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information.

Locked noticeboards are intended generally for Parish Council specific information although consideration will be given to using the space for notices pertaining to activities of interest or other important information.

Publications

In Touch with Walton, is the Parish Council's quarterly publication and is delivered to all houses and most local businesses in the village. This newsletter is used to publicise parish council specific events and issues but may also be used to highlight other organisations, information and activities within the parish or of specific relevance to the parish of Walton.

Advertising in the village newsletter is subject to the policy adopted by the parish council

Adopted by Walton Parish Council:

This policy should be reviewed on an annual basis.

REVIEW - Amendments agreed by council at December 10th 2021 PCM:

Policy adopted 2021.22.159

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Policy adopted: 2023.24.136 Communications a.