

## Communication and Media Relations Policy


### Document Control

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# Communication and Media Relations Policy

## 1. Policy Statement

- This policy will focus on the communication efforts of the council and ensure it to be effective and efficient and committed to the provision of accurate information in its activity to serve the people of Tacolneston and the wider community.
- This policy explains how the Council may work with the media and the public to meet the objective in accordance with the legal requirements and restrictions that apply.
- This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity as well as the National Guidance (The Good Councillors Guide 2018).
- The Councils Communication Procedure supports this policy.
  - The Parish Council is accountable to members of the public and has a duty to convey its decisions and actions through various media.
  - All communication will be conveyed in an open and straightforward manner.
  - The Parish Clerk is the Proper Officer of the Parish Council and is responsible for all formal communication between the Council, the press and members of the public.
- Normal Parish Council meetings are meetings held in public but not public meetings. The
- Annual Parish meeting is a public meeting.
- No individual Councillor shall be the sole custodian of any correspondence named/intended for the Parish Council or Working Party.
- These guidelines apply to everyone, whether or not they have read them.
- Current Covid-19 guidelines are to be followed with regard to having meetings.

## 2. Legal Requirements

- This policy is subject to the Council's obligations which are set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018 the General Data Protection Regulation 2018, other legislation which may apply and the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations.
- The Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law.
- The Council cannot disclose confidential information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order.
- Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential
- information, which arise from the Code of Conduct.

## 3. Community Engagement

- The Council will facilitate community engagement with the electorate by:
  - Publishing its meeting dates, times and venues
  - Providing an allocated period of time for Public Participation in meetings
  - Consulting with the electorate to gauge public opinion
  - Maintaining an up to date and accessible website

#### 4. Methods of Communication

The Council will use the following media to communicate its activities:

<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>METHOD OF COMMUNICATION</b>	<b>RESPONSIBILITY</b>
Approved minutes	Website	Parish Clerk
Draft minutes	Website	Parish Clerk
Agendas	Website / Notice boards	Parish Clerk
Council policies/procedures	Website	Parish Clerk
Annual external audit	Website	Parish Clerk
Adopted Annual Accounts	Website	Parish Clerk
Councillor vacancies	Website / Notice boards / Local Media	Parish Clerk
Financial information	Website	Parish Clerk

Other information will be provided in accordance with the Council's adopted Publication Scheme.

#### 5. Protocol

- The Parish Clerk is solely responsible for the preparation of notices of Council meetings, agendas and minutes.
- The Parish Clerk is responsible for the development and maintenance of the Council's website so that it remains current.
- All correspondence addressed to the Parish Council will be actioned by the Parish Clerk.
- Information that needs to be considered by the Parish Council will be placed on the first agenda after its receipt.
- Agendas for Council meetings will be accompanied with sufficient written reports and information to enable Members to make an informed decision.
- Agendas will be issued electronically so that Members receive them at least 3 clear days before all meetings of the Council.
- Agendas and minutes for all meetings of the Council will be published on the Council's website.
- Other relevant information will be emailed to Members in between meetings.

#### 6. Requests for Information

In accordance with the relevant Standing Order; requests for information held by the Council shall be handled in accordance with the Council's Privacy Policy in respect of handling requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 2018.

- The Parish Clerk shall refer any correspondence and / or notices served by, the Information Commissioner to the Council.
- The Council shall have the power to do anything to facilitate compliance with the current Freedom of Information Legislation.
- In accordance with Standing Order neither the Parish Clerk, nor Members, will disclose confidential information that is exempt under the Freedom of Information Act.
- Agenda's and its supporting papers, and the minutes from a meeting where confidential or sensitive information is discussed, shall not disclose or otherwise undermine such information which, for special reasons, is not in the public interest.

## **7. Tacolneston Parish Council's Communication Aim**

Will be to:

- Always use the agreed Council style.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Keep to plain English, avoiding jargon and acronyms.
- Always give the Parish Clerk's contact details, e-mail address and website if applicable.
- Always use the correct name of the Council.

## **8. Meetings of the Council.**

In the likelihood of not being able to hold in person council meetings, virtual meetings to be considered and NALC guidelines to be followed.

### **8.1 Agenda – General**

- The agenda should be clear and concise and information kept to a minimum.
- Agenda items will be numbered consecutively for ease of reference.
- It should contain sufficient information for both members and the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- Items for decisions or recommendations will have supporting information such as reports, applications, and letters. These will be circulated to councillors with the Agenda.
- Agenda for meetings of the Council will be circulated and made available to the public a minimum of 3 clear days before the day of the meeting.
- Current best practice is distribution 5 or 7 clear days before the meeting. A clear day does not include the day of the notice or the day of the meeting and excludes weekends and bank holidays.
- Spare copies of the agenda should be available for the public attending meetings.

### **8.2 Agenda – Public Involvement**

- There is no mechanism for the public to directly place matters onto the Agenda.
- However, the Council has arrangements for public questions, comments or representations in "Public Participation".
- This is limited to five minutes per person (unless agreed otherwise).
- The matter may be placed on the agenda of the next meeting, responded to by the Parish Clerk, or simply noted.
- No formal decisions can be taken, on a matter, not on the agenda for that meeting.

### **8.3 Agenda – Procedural Items**

- Procedural items normally include:
- Apologies for absence.
- Declarations of interest and requests for dispensations.
- Include standard items in accordance with the latest regulations or guidance concerning Councillor's interests.
- An item to enable the Chair to authorize the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record. This item is purely for recording corrections and amendments for accuracy purposes, not for raising matters arising from the minutes. See section on Minutes below.

- Subject to the Council's Standing Orders, custom or practice, there may be other procedural items, by way of receiving information that are not to be the subject of discussion or debate at the meeting.

#### 8.4 Agenda – Business Items

- These will be determined by the Council's activities.
- Some items will recur from previous meetings, and in such cases it is good practice to provide a reference to the previous minutes.
- Each matter should be given a clear heading as to what the agenda item is about and a brief indication of what the meeting is going to consider.
- More complicated items may require a written report (see below). If there are reports or supporting information this must be clearly identified on the Agenda so that Councillors and the public know to refer to them. The agenda item should refer to the report by its title and other documentation by some suitable reference.
- A draft agenda should be prepared in advance of the publication date and shared with the Chair. The Chair has responsibility for the proper conduct of the meeting and needs to be involved in planning the meeting.
- The order of business items are important. For example, it might be appropriate to include controversial items, or items for which there is likely to be public interest and attendance, early in the agenda. Items where the press and public are likely to be excluded should be put at the end.

#### 9. Reports

- Those making the decision must have the full relevant information. Council's decisions can be set aside by a court if due regard has not been given to current relevant information or irrelevant considerations have been applied.
- The best way of providing this is through a report with accompanying documentation.
  - Reports maybe prepared by the Parish Clerk, by other officer, or on occasions by Councillors themselves. Especially when reporting back to the Council;
    - on an event attended.
    - research done at the request.
    - as a result of a Working Party meeting.
- These should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision.
  - Reports and information will be circulated at the same time as the agenda and made available to the public on parish website, unless they include confidential matters.
  - Even if the documentation has been circulated before (either at a previous meeting, or in the run up to a meeting) it should be included again for ease of reference.

#### 10. Minutes

The minutes of a Council meeting are a public record of the decisions of the Council and great care should be taken in their format and production. The minutes can be produced in court and other judicial processes as evidence of decisions of the Council. They confirm the resolutions made, and form part of the Council archives, which must be preserved.

##### 10.1 Minutes should be:

- As brief as is consistent with accuracy.
- Precise and concise.

- Self-contained (that is: complete in themselves and understandable without reference to other documents).
- Decisive (so that there is no doubt about the decision made).

#### 10.2. Minutes should not:

- Be a verbatim record of the meeting.
- Document opinions or views that were expressed at the meeting.

### 11. Guidance on Minute writing

- Use plain English using full sentences and appropriate grammar.
- Use the house style with a clear heading containing the status of the meeting, the place and date, including the time the meeting started and ended as well as any adjournments.
- Start with an alphabetical list of the Councillors present at the meeting.
- Number them consecutively for ease of reference.
- These should be written in the past tense and should include reference to any written reports submitted.
- It is not necessary to refer to individual speakers by name unless this is significant.
- It may be appropriate to record the fact that an applicant, supporter or an objector addressed the Council on a planning application or that the Parish Clerk, or an Officer of the district or County Council reported on a matter.
- Abbreviations should be avoided and acronyms only used after having written the title in full at the first mention.
- The decision should be separately highlighted for ease of identification and words used to show that it is a decision, for example;
  - RESOLVED 1) That----**
  - 2) That----**
- Wording of the proposal should be included in full.
  - It is necessary to note the name of the proposer and seconded in the minutes
  - The result of the vote in the minutes that was taken (unless a recorded vote is requested).
- Order of the minutes will follow the order of the agenda.
- Declarations of interest must be carefully recorded in the minutes,
  - Naming the Councillor.
  - Clearly indicating which item the interest referred to.
  - Whether the interest is a pecuniary interest or other interest.
  - Giving the nature of the interest and whether the member left the meeting during the discussion and decision on the item.
- Where Standing Orders provide for the submission by notice of formal written Council Meetings, it is appropriate to record the names of the Councillors proposing and seconding the motion in the minutes.
- Where Standing Orders make provision for a recorded vote to be taken, or when a Councillor asks for votes to be recorded in the minutes, the minutes should record the names of Councillors voting for and against the matter or the individual Councillor's vote accordingly.
- Where Standing Orders provide for a special procedure (other than routine arrangements) to be followed at a meeting it is generally appropriate to include a reference in the minutes to the procedure being followed as evidence to that effect.
- Decisions to exclude the press and public should be fully recorded in the minutes, making it absolutely clear to which matter or part of it the exclusion applied.

- Resolutions that are confidential or for some other special reason are not in the public interest to disclose must be recorded in the minutes, without undermining or disclosing the confidential or other sensitive information.

## 12. Process

- Minutes will be written up as soon as possible so that the minute taker's memory is fresh and interpretation of the information available from handwritten notes of the meeting is easier.
- Minutes in draft form should therefore record that fact clearly (at the top and bottom) to the effect: "Minutes subject to approval at the next meeting" or by using a "draft" watermark.
- Once prepared they will be submitted to the Chair of the meeting concerned to check. This is an opportunity to pick up any mistakes in the content or identify typing errors, but it is not to be used by the Chair as a means of re-writing the minutes.
- The draft minutes will then be circulated, within ten clear working days after the meeting, for information only to all Councillors.
  - This gives Councillors the chance to comment upon minor accuracy issues (spelling and so on) before formal publication of the draft minutes.
- The draft minutes will be published on the website within one month, as per Local Government Transparency code 2015.
- The draft minutes will be considered at the next meeting for acceptance and signing by the Chair as a true record.
  - If the Council or committee makes changes to the minutes before acceptance and signing, the wording changes should be recorded in the minutes of the meeting that agreed the changes and the original minutes must be amended to reflect the changes.
  - The copy signed by the Chair will contain the alterations, recorded in longhand, with the changes signed and dated.
- After the draft minutes are approved, the contemporaneous notes or the recording of the meeting shall be destroyed, along with all copies of the draft minutes.
- The signed minutes shall replace the draft minutes on the website.
- The signed minutes shall be retained in the Council's archives. A separate set of signed minutes will be kept for public inspection and for reference at meetings or other purposes.

**Note** - The resolutions made at a meeting have immediate effect. They are not subject to the preparation of draft minutes or the approval of minutes of that meeting at a later meeting.

## 13. Other Communication Methods:

### 13.1. The Parish Notice Board

- The Council may identify locations for community notice boards, seek the relevant permissions and install notice boards to promote the Council's activities.
- The notice boards when in place, will be updated regularly and will display:
  - The full title of the Council.
  - The name, address, telephone number and email address of the Parish Clerk.
  - The Council's website address. Where the minutes, the code of conduct and other public documents may be inspected.
  - Election notices.
  - Notice of public rights.
  - Relevant insurance certificates.



- A list of Members of the Council.
- Venues, dates and times of meetings set out for the year.
- Agenda for forthcoming meetings.
- If practicable, minutes of meetings or a summary of recent decisions.

### 13.2. Website

- All council agenda, reports, policies, financial statements and minutes will be placed on a dedicated website, with appropriate archive facilities.
- This will kept up to date on a regular basis.

### 13.3 Community Newsletter

Clerk to submit to Editor of Community Newsletter an article to be publicized quarterly.

## 14. Parish Council Correspondence

- All official correspondence will be from the Parish Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letter headed paper.
- Responses to correspondence received will be given within ten working days of receipt, where possible, if not an acknowledgement will be sent, and the letter will be discussed at the next Parish Council meeting.
- Where correspondence is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (for example copy to XX).

## 15. Communications working party

- Is a decision-making forum with regard to social media and communication projects relating to the council.
- The Working Party will suggest, facilitate and approve articles and generate communication in order to engage, advise and exchange views with the residents of Tacolneston and thereby assisting the Clerk.

## 16. Councillors

### 16.1 Correspondence with external parties

- Written correspondence (letters or e-mails) from Councillors to other parties on Council matters should be sent through the Clerk, unless written agreement from the Council to do otherwise has been given.
  - Councillors must use their judgement when communicating with others in a personal capacity as to how the correspondence will be received. If there is any risk of the recipient considering that the Councillor is speaking on behalf of the Council, then it is Councillor's responsibility to make it clear that they are not.
- Correspondence will be signed by the Parish Clerk and will make clear that it is written in the Clerks official capacity and authorised by the Council.
- A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and the writer should note on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

### 16.2. Communication between Councillors and Parish Clerk

- Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorized to do so.
- No individual Councillor, Chair or otherwise, may give instructions to the Clerk or to

another employee inconsistent or conflicting with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.

- Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Council.
- E-mails:
  - Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk.
  - Reasons for urgency should be stated.
  - Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk.
  - E-mails from Councillors to external parties (on Council matters) should be copied to the Clerk.
  - Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.
  - Clerks and Councillors are not required to send read receipt acknowledgements of emails
  - All correspondence received by the clerk on behalf of the council shall be forwarded to all Councillors. Unless of a significant sensitive or confidential matter.

### 17. Vexation Conduct and Communications

- A small percentage of people may correspond with, or complain to, the Parish Council in a way that could reasonably be described as obsessive, harassing or repetitious. This correspondence from a minority of individuals can take up a disproportionate amount of resource and can affect the parish council's ability to do its work and provide a service to others and can result in unacceptable stress and burden for the Clerk and Councillors.
- Defining complaints and/or correspondence as vexatious is a very serious step and only undertaken as a last resort. For that reason, it is essential that the decision to make correspondence or complaints vexatious is evidence-based and reviewed regularly.
- Any concerns about a particular correspondent should be discussed with the Chair in the first instance.

17.1. The Parish Council's adopted definition of vexatious correspondence is:

- *"correspondence that is, by nature, manifestly unjustified, inappropriate or improper use of a formal procedure"* (adapted from the ICO. Dealing with Vexatious requests).
- It shall be for the Parish Clerk, where necessary, in conjunction with the Chairman, to determine any correspondence as being "vexatious". The Parish Clerk will use the indicators as below when considering email traffic that is potentially vexatious and consider any legal or statutory obligations placed upon the council to respond.

(Taken from Dealing with Vexatious requests (section 14) Freedom of Information's Act version 1.3 2015)

#### **Indicators (not listed in any order of importance)**

##### **Abusive or aggressive language**

The tone or language of the requester's correspondence goes beyond the level of criticism that a public authority or its employees should reasonably expect to receive.

##### **Burden on the authority**

The effort required to meet the request will be so grossly oppressive in terms of the strain on time and resources, that the authority cannot reasonably be expected to comply, no matter how legitimate the subject matter or valid the intentions of the requester.

##### **Personal grudges**

For whatever reason, the requester is targeting their correspondence towards a particular employee or office holder against whom they have some personal enmity.

**Unreasonable persistence**

Authority, or otherwise subjected to some form of independent scrutiny.

**Unfounded accusations**

The request makes completely unsubstantiated accusations against the public authority or specific employees.

**Intransigence**

The requester takes an unreasonably entrenched position, rejecting attempts to assist and advise out of hand and shows no willingness to engage with the authority.

**Frequent or overlapping requests**

The requester submits frequent correspondence about the same issue or sends in new requests before the public authority has had an opportunity to address their earlier enquiries.

**Deliberate intention to cause annoyance**

The requester has explicitly stated that it is their intention to cause disruption to the public authority, or is a member of a campaign group whose stated aim is to disrupt the authority.

**Scattergun approach**

The request appears to be part of a completely random approach, lacks any clear focus, or seems to have been solely designed for the purpose of 'fishing' for information without any idea of what might be revealed.

**Disproportionate effort**

The matter being pursued by the requester is relatively trivial and the authority would have to expend a disproportionate amount of resources in order to meet their request.

**No obvious intent to obtain information**

The requester is abusing their rights of access to information by using the legislation as a means to vent their anger at a particular decision, or to harass and annoy the authority, for example, by requesting information, which the authority knows them to possess already.

**Futile requests**

The issue at hand individually affects the requester and has already been conclusively resolved by the authority or subjected to some form of independent investigation.

**Frivolous requests**

The subject matter is inane or extremely trivial and the request appears to lack any serious purpose. The request is made for the sole purpose of amusement. The requester is attempting to reopen an issue, which has already been comprehensively addressed by the public.

This procedure is designed to address vexatious correspondence and complaints. It should assist the Council to manage inappropriately demanding or unreasonable behaviour from vexatious correspondents.

**17.2 Handling correspondences**

- If an Individual is determined by the Clerk to have requested information vexatiously, then the Parish Clerk shall issue the individual with a formal refusal notice in line with the Freedom of Information Act.
- If an individual is entering into more general vexatious correspondence with the Council, then the Clerk shall notify them that their correspondence is considered vexatious and the Council will not entertain any further correspondence with them.
  - The letter should state that any future correspondence would be passed direct to the council who will consider at the next meeting whether it raises any substantive new issue(s).

- The correspondent should be advised that if no substantive new issue is raised, any future correspondence will not receive a response.
- If an individual continues to engage with the Council on matters where the Parish Clerk has already indicated they are acting vexatiously or is repeatedly raising a range of issues with the Council that appear to have no serious purpose or value, then the Parish Clerk may refer the matter to the next Council meeting. The Council can then determine whether any additional measures can and should be taken;
  - If the council agrees with the assessment, the Chair and Clerk should prepare a brief statement of why it considers the complaint or correspondence to be vexatious, including its effect upon the Clerk, Councillors and/or the village. This should be accompanied by a list of correspondence over the last 12 months via email, telephone and letter, including information about which the correspondence was addressed to, how many people / organisations it was copied to on each occasion, and a one-line description of each piece of correspondence.
  - They should be advised that the decision would be reviewed in six months from the date of the letter advising them that their complaint/correspondence has been determined to be vexatious.
- There is no route of appeal against the decision that a complaint or correspondence is vexatious;
  - Any future correspondence should be passed to the council for consideration; if it decides that it raises no genuinely new and substantive issues, no response is required.
  - If future correspondence does raise significant new issues, it should be responded to. It may be appropriate for the response to be routed via the Chair in order to prevent the renewal of 'scattergun' correspondence.

### 17.3 Reviewing the decision

Six months after the correspondent has been advised that their complaint and/or correspondence is vexatious, that decision should be reviewed.

- The council should meet to consider whether there has been any improvement in the vexatious behaviour over that time.
- The Clerk should write to the correspondent advising them of the outcome of the review.
  - If the behaviour has improved, future correspondence can be treated in the normal way.
  - If there has not been a significant improvement, the correspondence will continue to be treated as vexatious and will be reviewed every six months.

### 17.4 Further advice and guidance

- If a complainant continues to behave unreasonably, or overrides the restrictions placed on access to our service, we may decide to terminate contact with them and end any communication.
- Parishioners deemed unreasonably persistent and/or vexatious may result in refusal to allow the parishioner or their representative to attend Council meetings.
- The Clerk can ask the Parishioner to put all their concerns, in writing, to the Monitoring Officer, who will in turn take the necessary action.

## 18. Communication with the Press and Public

### 18.1 Minutes and Freedom of information

- Draft minutes are a qualified exemption under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, as they are classed as 'information intended for future publication'.
- Therefore, the Council may refuse to provide the information. However there is a duty to consider whether disclosure of the information requested is in the Public Interest. If, for example, a person wants to know whether something concerning them was supported or opposed by a Council and needs this information urgently, then it may not be reasonable in all the circumstances to make the person wait until the approved minutes are available. In any case, the resolutions have already taken effect. In other situations too it will not be in the public interest to withhold information in the handwritten notes, or draft minutes of the meeting.
- There are other qualified exemptions in the 2000 Act that enable a Council to refuse to provide information in handwritten notes or draft minutes if disclosure is not in the public interest. If, for example, disclosure would breach one of the statutory data protection principles, the request can be refused.
- If the information requested carries an absolute exemption in the 2000 Act, then there is no duty to consider the public interest. For example, if the information requested concerns information that was provided in confidence, a Council can refuse disclosure.

### 18.2. Press Releases

- The Parish Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chairman of the Council.
- Press reports from the Council or working parties should be from the Clerk or through the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- Unless a Councillor has been authorized by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, if asked for comment by the press they should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view.
- The press and public are invited to all full Council, and receive an agenda through the website and public notice boards.
- Unless a Councillor is absolutely certain that he/she is reporting the view of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.
- If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure, or via a Council agenda item.

### 18.3. Talking to the Media

- In response to a Council press release:
  - Any media enquiry is to be referred to the Parish Clerk and the author of the press release.
  - No-one else should offer any comment without prior discussion, except to confirm basic matters of fact (dates of events, spelling of name ect.).
- In response to an unsolicited approach from a journalist or reporter (this includes enquires about press releases issued by other organizations).
  - Any media enquiry is to be referred to the Parish Clerk and the author of the press release.
  - No-one else should offer any comment without prior discussion, except to confirm basic matters of fact (dates of events, spelling of name ect.).

#### 18.4. Monitoring

It is important to monitor the media for items (reports, articles, letters) about the Council in order to know:

- Whether press releases and statements issued by the Council are picked up and used effectively.
- What members of the community are saying about the Council.
- Councillors and Parish Clerk are encouraged to look out for items referring to the Council in the media; original press cuttings, where obtainable, should be sent to the Clerk.
- Anyone taking part in a radio or television broadcast should try to arrange for it to be recorded and a copy sent to the Clerk. In the absence of a recording, a note of the broadcaster's comments should be provided.

#### 18.5 Responding to Communication received by the Clerk

- The Clerk will communicate details of all non-urgent email correspondence received each month with the opportunity for councillors to request that correspondence.
- Emails or other forms of correspondence from members of the public or councillors to the clerk will receive prompt acknowledgment.