

# Ulcombe Parish Council

## Communications Policy – Adopted May 2024 (Reviewed annually)

(To be used in association with Press & Media Policy)

### Introduction

Ulcombe Parish Council (the Council) is committed to regular and open communications. The Council welcomes opportunities to engage with the local community and the wider public via the press, online and on social media platforms. This document covers the Council's approach to communications and defines the roles and responsibilities within the Council for:

- Communications – channels and principles
- Press
- Website
- Social Media
- Filming and recording of meetings
- Emails
- Correspondence
- Document management

Policies in this paper have been drawn from national guidelines and best practice examples from other parish councils<sup>1</sup>.

### Communications – channels and principles

1. The Council's communications will be open, honest and accessible.
2. The Council will agree a Communications and Engagement Plan to support activities arising from the annual budget and planning process.
3. The first point of contact for letters and emails to the Council is the Parish Clerk
4. Publicity generated by the Council will be appropriate, lawful, cost effective, objective, and even-handed. All communications will have regard to equality and diversity and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.
5. The Council noticeboard will be used for the publication of agendas, minutes and other Council information. In addition, the Council will use other channels of communication available to it whenever possible. This definitely includes use of the Council website ([www.ulcombeparishcouncil.co.uk](http://www.ulcombeparishcouncil.co.uk)) and where possible village newsletter, local broadsheets, and external notice boards at other sites.

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• <sup>1</sup> *Sources for this policy paper:* The code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity; NALC model standing orders; Governance Toolkit for Parishes and Town Councils; Welsh Local Government Association; Policy documents from diverse parish councils, including Fletching, Billingshurst, Stapeley & Croft; Oxfordshire Rural Community Council Toolkit (Facebook); Society of Local Council Clerks Advice note on Social Media May 2014; the 'Nolan Principles' of public life

6. Councillors will have their own opinions on issues and may be *predisposed* to particular viewpoints. Whilst they can express those views and play an active part in local discussions, it is essential they do not *predetermine* a position or decision in advance of hearing all the relevant information or prior to relevant Council resolutions being made. Councillors must not make up their minds until they have heard any contrary views. It is important that Councillors can demonstrate that, whatever their individual views, they remain open for discussion and persuasion when the Council meets to consider matters and vote on resolutions.<sup>2</sup>

## Press

7. Press releases and resulting media coverage increase public awareness of the Council's activities.
8. Press releases to promote a decision or the work of the Council will be prepared and issued by the Parish Clerk, the Chairman or Vice Chairman.
9. All enquiries from journalists should be directed to the Chairman, Parish Clerk or the Vice Chairman.
10. Reactive press releases can be prepared and issued in response to a specific question or as a rebuttal to a published article. Such statements should be dealt with in a timely fashion.
11. The Clerk, Chair or Vice Chairman will base media responses on:
  - a. Adopted minutes and resolutions of the Council
  - b. Statements and/or media lines agreed/resolved by the Council
12. Statements and media responses must reflect the Council's opinion and any agreed '*tone of voice*' for communications.
13. Statements, written quotes and press releases issued on behalf of the Council must be circulated within 2 working days to all Council members and the Clerk, with a brief update on the context of the press enquiry.
14. Individual members of the Council can contact the press, give interviews, write letters-to-editors or produce articles *as individuals*. However, unless they have authority from the Council they should not use the *Councillor* prefix with their names and should make it clear at all times that the views they express are their own and do not represent the Council in any way. Individual members should consider the implications and context of media enquiries and the potential impact of publicity on the Council's legal responsibilities or activities.
15. Members must comply with the Council's Code of Conduct when dealing with the media.

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• <sup>2</sup> "The Localism Act (2011) makes it clear that it is proper for councillors to play an active part in local discussions, and that they should not be liable to legal challenge as a result. This will help them better represent their constituents and enrich local democratic debate. People can elect their councillor confident in the knowledge that they will be able to act on the issues they care about and have campaigned on."

• *Communities and Local Government Plain English Guide to the Localism Act (Department for Communities and Local Government)*

16. The Council acknowledges the right of the media to obtain information under the Freedom of Information Act and will comply with requests for information.
17. Journalists are welcome and are encouraged to attend Council meetings (including committee meetings) and are entitled to receive agendas, reports and minutes on request.
18. The Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during an election period.

## Digital Communications

We understand that not all residents will have access to digital and social media channels such as the website and emails, whether by choice, cost, competence or accessibility. Traditional methods of communication – noticeboards and newsletters will form the backbone of our communications.

## Website

19. Our website will become increasingly important as a timely, comprehensive and cost-effective channel. We are committed to improving the usability and content of the site.
20. We will aim to update the Council's website every week. The site will include:
  - a. Agendas and minutes of all meetings
  - b. Forthcoming events, local news and useful information
  - c. Council's policies and procedures
  - d. Useful links
  - e. Information and contact details of Councillors and the Clerk.
21. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative, respectful and accurate.

## Social media

Social media channels such as *Facebook* will enable the Council to have two-way conversations with the people we represent and, in the future, will increasingly be a means to encourage residents to express their views and engage with consultations and surveys.

22. The Council's *Facebook* page is<sup>3</sup> a platform to discuss key topics, share pictures and information, advertise events and update local information, news or progress made on particular activities. The page is updated regularly by the Clerk or authorised Councillor.
23. Councillors and Ulcombe parish residents are encouraged to comment and share views on parish matters on *Facebook*
24. It must be made clear whether Councillors are posting as individuals or in their capacity as Councillors (*See note on predetermination*)
25. Councillors will comply with the law<sup>4</sup> and with the Code of Conduct when communicating via *Facebook* and other digital channels. They will:
  - a. Show respect for others

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• <sup>3</sup> A resolution was passed in order to establish an Ulcombe Parish Council Facebook page

<sup>4</sup> Councillors will comply with the laws on defamation, data protection and copyright

- b. Not disclose confidential information about people or the Council
- c. Not bully or intimidate others
- d. Not try to secure benefits for themselves or disadvantage others
- e. Abide by the laws of equality

26. Facebook content should be objective, balanced, informative, respectful and accurate.

## **Emails**

27. The status of emails:

- a. Email is regularly used for the management and administration of the business of the Council.
- b. Emails should be regarded as having the same legal status as hard-copy written documents for the purposes of production, use, retention and disclosure. They are not to be treated as different from paper documents.
- c. In common with printed forms of communication, email messages cannot be guaranteed to be private and secure: do not print or send confidential, sensitive or personal data unless approved by Council

28. Production and use of emails:

- a. Councillors should use personal and professional courtesy and consideration in emails, respecting others and complying with Standing Orders and the Code of Conduct
- b. Emails should be open and straightforward – for instance, writers should make it clear when others are being copied in on correspondence or when the contents of an email should be treated as confidential.
- c. It is sometimes helpful for the Chairman/Vice Chairman to be copied in to emails to the Clerk. They may always be approached for guidance by phone or email.
- d. If offended by the content or tone of an incoming message get a second opinion to check out their interpretation and make sure the response is objective.
- e. Always respect the privacy of others, remembering that e-mail can be just as intrusive as unsolicited 'phone calls or letters.
- f. Respect the confidentiality of information encountered inadvertently in e-mail or other records.
- g. Check with the sender if there is any doubt about the authenticity of a message.
- h. Avoid the use of jargon which might be misunderstood or unknown to the receiver.
- i. Members should take care not to give the impression in emails that they represent the Council (unless authorised to do so).

## **Filming and Recording of Meetings**

29. The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 makes provision for the filming of council meetings (including committees and sub-committees). Where filming or recording occurs, Councillors should be mindful of the Code of Conduct, Standing Orders, any potential infringements of copyright and, in the case of members of the public attending or invited to speak at meetings, individual rights to privacy.

## **Council Correspondence**

- 30.** All correspondence for the Council should be addressed to the Clerk, who is the first point of contact for the Council. Communication ideally should be in written form, either by email or letter.
- 31.** The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- 32.** All official Council correspondence should be sent by the Clerk on council headed paper.
- 33.** All correspondence to the Parish Clerk will be acknowledged within seven days of receipt, unless the clerk is on annual leave. If email is used then an acknowledgment will be sent by email.
- 34.** If a parishioner wishes a subject to be raised, and it is appropriate for discussion at a Parish Council meeting, then the Parish Clerk will have to be notified seven days before the publication of the agenda. All correspondence and communication/documents must be received by the Parish Clerk a minimum of 24 hours prior to a meeting. Exceptions to this rule are planning and other documents which require a response prior to the next meeting of the Parish Council and representations or presentations from the public & outside speakers regarding a planning issue.
- 35.** The Parish Council will determine the response, if any is required, to correspondence received. The Parish Council reserves the right to not respond to any correspondents that are taking up a disproportionate amount of the Parish Clerk's time. Correspondents will be informed that the matter will not be pursued and the reason given.
- 36.** If Councillors engage in correspondence as Portfolio holder or representative of the Parish Council, they must copy the Clerk into that correspondence.
- 37.** The Clerk sends out the Council's correspondence to other bodies. Should it become appropriate or necessary for a Councillor to issue correspondence in his/or her own name, this must be authorised by the Council and the correspondence must make it clear that it is being written in an official capacity and has been authorised by the Council.
- 38.** No individual councillors should communicate with companies/individuals with which the council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries should go through the Clerk.

