

# GOTHERINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

## COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gotherington Parish Council (GPC) articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community.

It provides information on important parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment 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 GPC does, whilst also enabling GPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

The principles of these Guidelines apply to Parish Councillors and The Clerk to GPC. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATION**

Good communications will enable GPC 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 borough and region.
- be an effective voice of the community
- maintain and enhance the reputation of GPC
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of GPC or the parish

### **WHO IS COMMUNICATING**

#### **Parish Clerk**

The Parish Clerk has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies

The Parish Clerk is provided with a Council email address which is to be used for the purpose of communicating council business

The Parish Clerk will be required to communicate both verbally and in writing on a regular basis with the community as part of their duties. It is imperative that staff handle such communications with courtesy and professionalism at all times

#### **Councillors**

Elected or Co-opted members will be regularly approached by members of the community,

as this is part of their role. However, enquiries from the public dealt with by Councillors will reflect on GPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email. When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk should be sought.

At no time should Councillors make promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter.

All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to GPC. 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 on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.

Councillors must ensure that any all communication with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of GPC regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject.

## **COUNCIL MEETINGS AND COUNCILLOR INTERACTION**

GPC meets on the second Tuesday of every month. Meetings start at 7:30pm. The floor is open to the public and press for representations and questions for 15 minutes before the start of the main meeting.

GPC has a number of working groups whose activities are reported back to the council in the monthly meetings.

An initial draft of the minutes shall be produced by the Clerk and issued to all Councillors within 7 days by email for review. Any amendments shall be made and a subsequent draft issued for publication. The Agenda and Minutes of the meetings are published on the council website following approval at a council meeting.

Councillors who have taken on responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall lodge a copy of any such communications with the Clerk.

Guidance on interaction:

- GPC Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Parish Council,
- All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman or the Parish Clerk.
- If appropriate, for a specific issue the Chairman may authorise the Clerk or another councillor to make a statement on behalf of GPC.
- All media comment must accurately reflect GPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents
  - e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of GPC made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media using a copy of the minutes of the meeting.
- The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able to speak with some authority, using plain English.

- Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of GPC or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the Parish Council or members of the community.
- Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from GPC's Solicitor before any response is made.
- Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement', to the media are not acting on behalf of the Council, and must state clearly inform the media:
  - that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of GPC;
  - that other Councillors may hold a different view;
  - that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by GPC.

## WHO WE SHOULD BE COMMUNICATING WITH

The Council's audience is wide and varied but will typically include:

- GPC employees and contractors
- Residents
- County & Borough Councillors and staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people
- The media
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- Businesses in the community
- MPs
- Other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)

## HOW WE SHOULD BE COMMUNICATING

Different forms of communication will appeal to different ages, social groups and demographics so it is important to ensure that within reason, all options for increasing communication and participation are reviewed over time in order to communicate effectively with everyone.

The advances made in information technology offer new ways of communicating. At the same time, for many people, traditional methods – newspapers, telephone, posters and leaflets – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

Currently Council communication is achieved mainly through:

- Parish Council meetings
- Councillor interaction,
- GPC website, managed by the Parish Clerk.
- Notices on village notice boards and in the phone box
- Contributions Gotherington Topics, the Parish newsletter, which is issued 3 times a year
- Gotherington Parish Council Facebook page

GPC will continue to explore ways in which communication could be improved:

#### PRESS - MANAGE THE MEDIA EFFECTIVELY

Key points for effective management of media relations:

- Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time
- Be helpful, polite and positive
- Never say 'no comment'
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Chairman or the Parish Clerk.
- Evaluate media coverage
- Issue timely and relevant press releases
- Pre-empt potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR (where possible)

#### VILLAGE NOTICE BOARDS

The village notice boards and old telephone box will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information.

The Parish Clerk will delegate to members of GPC the posting of notices to the notice boards.

#### ONLINE PRESENCE

##### Council Website

Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.

GPC's website is to be regularly updated and kept up-to-date. The Parish Clerk is responsible for the GPC website

All communications should promote the council website and if appropriate its social media accounts.

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It is important to ensure that links to the website are provided from other key partners, especially Tewkesbury Borough Council.

#### Council Facebook page

GPC has a dedicated Facebook page which is managed by the Chair, posts can be made to advertise information, but responses cannot be made. The site is purely for communication of Parish Council matters and is not a discussion forum. Parish Council matters should not be posted on the Village Facebook page.

The dedicated FB page provides a forum for reaching a large section of the village with Parish Council Matters. Posts have to be carefully monitored by the administrators to ensure the content was appropriate to the forum.

#### PUBLICATIONS

##### Gotherington Topics

Gotherington Topics and is delivered to all households in the village three times a year. The Chair of the Parish Council produces an article which is included in each publication, updating members of the community of the Parish Council activities and plans

#### EMAIL

GPC councillor emails should be considered to be in the public domain.

All-inclusive group emails should cover the entire Council including the Clerk, Email communication should be primarily focused on parish council activities.

Information that relates to matters on an agenda should be circulated to all Parish Councillors at least three days prior to the relevant meeting

Discussion of matters should not be conducted via email unless this has been agreed in a meeting or there is a pressing time constraint

Where possible" reply to all emails" should be avoided unless they contain additional information that is relevant to decision making or should be common knowledge. Responses of acknowledgement or thanks should only be sent to relevant individuals

All emails should be courteous and polite and should not be disrespectful or rude.

#### COMMUNICATION - GOOD PRACTICE

It is imperative that:

- all communication from GPC is courteous, timely, professional, appropriate and reflects the decisions and policies of council;

- all individuals communicating on behalf of GPC are aware that every piece of communication reflects on the reputation of GPC in the community;

The Parish Clerk and councillors are ambassadors of GPC and this is reflected in all communications. Any communications from GPC will meet the following criteria:

- be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which GPC does not own the copyright or does not have permission to use;
- not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
- if official business, in any case of doubt, communications will be referred to the Chair or the Clerk to GPC prior to release;
- social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

Equally, it is expected that any communications to GPC would meet similar criteria:

#### COMMUNICATION IN PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS

The published agenda should be followed and discussion should be limited to those matters on the agenda in line with the Council's Standing Orders.

Parish Councillors should debate the agenda items, listening to the points raised by other Councillors, without interrupting, so that an informed vote can be made on each item.

It is not acceptable for members of the Parish Council to shout or insult other Council members or members of the public. Any Parish Councillor not behaving in a polite and respectful manner will be asked to leave the meeting.