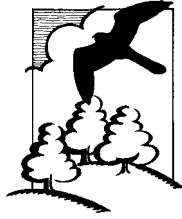


Hawkhurst Parish Council

Communications Policy



July 2019

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1. Background

In March 2019 Hawkhurst Parish Council adopted a five-year strategy. The first of the Councils key aims within the strategy was to be open, accessible and responsive. On communications the strategy says the Parish Council would take a proactive approach to communicating using all media available with local residents and stakeholders and provide easy to use feedback. To do this the Council will:

1. develop and implement a communications plan;
2. actively seek the views of residents and stakeholders;
3. actively promote the work of the Council;
4. develop new council website; and,
5. improve social media presence.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to deliver the commitment in the Parish Council's strategic plan with respect to communications. It will define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and provide guidelines.

Hawkhurst Parish Council (HPC) articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It will provide information about the services it provides and on important parish matters from local history to public services and planning issues affecting the community.

HPC encourages comment from interested individuals and groups. Actively listening to what people think will enable us to better respond to people's needs and priorities and thereby enhance life in the parish. Indeed, good two-way communication will enable HPC to:

- better understand the needs of the Parish;
- be an effective voice of the community; and,
- develop appropriate strategies and priorities.

The principles of these guidelines apply to Parish Councillors, the Clerk and deputy clerk. It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications between HPC, councillors and with third parties.

We aim to:

- build trust by being open and transparent;
- give people the information to understand accurately what HPC does, and aims to achieve, whilst also enabling HPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners;
- build residents and other stakeholders involvement with the Council and support efforts to improve the quality of life for those who live, work or visit the parish; and,
- use a variety of communication methods to ensure that the way the Council communicates keeps everyone included and informed.

3. Stakeholders

We aim to reach everyone who has an interest in the Parish – whether they live, work or visit the village. It is important that we are able to effectively communicate with anyone who is interested and may want to become involved in influencing the future of the Parish. This will include:

- village residents;
- community groups/organisations;
- agencies (e.g. local police);
- local schools;
- County and District Councillors;
- local MP;
- local businesses and employers; and,
- local media.

4. Guide for communication

It is important that Council communications are effective. They ought to be:

- short and to the point;
- courteous and polite;
- in plain English;
- informative, based on facts and information;
- in a consistent format and style;
- clear about the action required or taken; and,
- respectful of confidential information and aqn peoples' privacy.

5. Methods of communication

The Council will use a variety of methods of communication based on what reaches its intended audience most effectively and efficiently.

Council Website	The Council website is our primary method for general communication with our stakeholders. The new website, will need ongoing development and its existence publicised. We wish to make it an effective form of two-way communication between HPC and our stakeholders. The website must be kept up to date with information on activities and news, as well as provide details of the Council's policies and procedures. It will also include links to other websites offering information of interest to our stakeholders. There will be ability to sign up to emailed updates from the Council.
Councillors' and Clerk's contact details	Contact details are published on the website to encourage open access.
Council notice boards & office window	The condition of the Parish noticeboards and Parish office reflect on the Council's professionalism and will be kept in good condition and regularly updated with important information about the Council's activities and events. This enables those who are without access to the internet to keep aware of HPC activity.

Council meetings	All Council meetings are publicised and are open to the public to attend with a period at the start of each Full Council meeting where the councillors are able hear issues raised by members of the public. This is a very important part of our communication strategy. Members of the public are then welcome to stay and hear the rest of the meeting.
Council Agendas and Minutes	Agendas and minutes of Council meetings are available on the website and on the council notice boards.
Annual Parish Meeting	The annual parish meeting is held in early May every year and provides an opportunity to communicate and discuss Council activities over the past year and objectives for the following year. There will also be other speakers on topics of significance to the Parish.
Magazine	The HPC does not currently produce a Parish Magazine, but instead supports independently produced local magazines. This includes submitting stories about Council activities, seeking feedback, and, ensuring Parish Council contact details are included. Where available links to the local magazines will be included on our website. We may on occasion advertise, sponsor or subsidise magazine printing or distribution.
Press Releases	Press releases are given to local media on significant points of interest or achievement.
Councillor's Representation and Networking	We are committed to regular involvement with local groups and organisations through representation on local groups and at events or meetings.
Twitter and Facebook	We are not planning to get directly involved with Twitter and Facebook at the moment, due to the time commitment to keep them up-to-date, but we do post information on the independent Hawkhurst Community Facebook page.
External Correspondence	We will reply to external correspondence, both written and electronic in a timely manner. An acknowledgement will be sent within a week and a substantive reply within a month.
Surveys and consultation	Wherever possible HPC will actively seek to consult a wider audience and encourage and support the involvement of residents and other interested parties in its work. We are involved in the community and will regularly survey the opinions and desires of our stakeholders so we can reflect those in our future activity.
Community events	We often work with community groups or have stalls at Fetes and other events to engage with local residents

6. Contact with the media

All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman or the Parish Clerk.

Only the Chairman or Clerk are authorised to speak to the media about Council policy. If appropriate, and for a specific issue the Chairman may authorise another councillor to make a statement on behalf of HPC. The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able speak with some authority.

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 necessarily representative of Council policy.

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 be submitted via the Parish Clerk unless they have been specifically approved by Council.

All media comment must accurately reflect HPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies. Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from HPC's legal advisor before any response is made.

The Council may issue press statements 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. Individual councillors are not permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council.

All decisions of HPC made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media.

7. Councillors comments - Code of Conduct

Councillors are governed by a Code of Conduct which encourages open, informed, timely and courteous communication at all times. Aspects of the Councillors' Code of Conduct will apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Councillors should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

Councillors need to be particularly aware of the following:

- treat others with respect;
- avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments;
- comply with equality laws. Take care in publishing anything that might be considered sexist, racist, ageist or anti-faith;
- refrain from publishing anything received in confidence;
- ensure the Council, or the role of Councillor, is not brought into disrepute.

If there is any doubt about any online issues, the Clerk should be contacted.

Elected Members will be regularly approached for views and advice. It is essential for councillors to listen to and reflect upon issues raised. Although it is best to avoid making promises about future possible actions the Parish Council as this will raise expectations before a matter has been debated and agreed at a Council meeting. In particular, Councillors should note that stating an opinion on a planning matter that may come before the HPC, could leave them open to a complaint of pre-determination.

Councillors are free to state any personal view. However, Councillors should make it clear in interactions with residents, the press, or third parties that their response is from them as an individual Councillor. Councillors have no authority to represent the Council's view unless the matter has been agreed at a Council meeting and is a matter of public record, or they have been given specific mandate so to do at a Council meeting, or by the Chairman, or Clerk.

In the unlikely event that a libel or slander action against a Councillor or Clerk writing or speaking with the authority of the Council, the HPC will be liable for defending the action. Comments made personally by a councillor are unlikely to be defended by the Council.

The Clerk and the Chairman should be notified of any contact with the media as soon as possible.

All councillors are provided with a council email address, which is to be used for the purpose of conducting council business. Emails received by councillors and the Clerk or other staff may be subject of disclosed requests under Freedom of Information (FOI) or Data Protection (DP) regulations or in the course of legal proceedings. Using personal emails may make those accounts subject to FOI and DP requests.

8. Online communication and social media guidance

Residents expect councils to engage with them on their terms, via a number of channels and increasingly expect that local government will provide its services online. If HPC does not engage online, residents will still use these networks to talk about issues and bypass the council entirely.

HPC's website will contain a range of information about the Parish and the work of the Parish Council. Material published by the Council online must be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. It will be regularly updated and will include links to other key partners.

Only those persons authorised by the Clerk are permitted to post material, or use the Council's logo, on social media websites in the Council's name and on its behalf.

Social media issues for councillors

Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. For example, there are certain restrictions on using social media websites for electoral campaigning and extra care also needs to be taken when writing on planning matters.

Any form of communication carries with it the possibility of misunderstanding and social media is especially vulnerable to these problems. It is important to remember that what is said on-line is permanently published. A comment which would be seen as harmlessly or

humorous between friends could be seen as seriously offensive online. Posts can easily be misinterpreted and taken out of context as people viewing them may not be aware of the background of the issue being discussed.

It is sometimes hard for Councillors to separate their public and private lives. Many councils advise members to operate separate “public” and “private” social media accounts to maintain their personal privacy. Councillors mentioning council-related matters on their private social media accounts may mean that the Councillors Code of Conduct can apply to all posts.

Libel

If an untrue statement is published about a person that is damaging to that person’s reputation they may take a libel action. This also applies if we do not promptly remove known libellous comments on the website.

Copyright

Placing images or text on any of the Council’s websites from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without first seeking permission is likely to breach copyright. Councillors and Council employees should avoid publishing anything they are unsure about.

Data Protection and confidentiality

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless their written permission has first been obtained. In addition, some information Councillors receive will be commercially sensitive and subject to confidentiality.

Offensive material

HPC will not tolerate inappropriate or offensive use of its social media. It is impossible to write a list of everything that could be seen as inappropriate or offensive. It is likely to include things that could be reasonably considered threatening, discriminatory, harassment of an individual or group, or something that brings the Council into disrepute.

9. Clerks responsibilities

The Clerk is the executive of the Council. As such, the Clerk should receive all communications which ought to be formally brought to the attention of the Council and should issue all formal communications made by the Council. Councillors should refer any complaints or concerns relating to the Council received from residents to the Clerk.

The Clerk has overall responsibility for all issues in the communications policy unless specified otherwise and overall responsibility for overseeing communication with members of the community and outside bodies.

In the event of any media enquiry, the Clerk in consultation with the Chair, is responsible for issuing a response from the Council. The Clerk, in consultation with the Chair, shall issue a press release on behalf of the Council where it is considered necessary to publicise an activity of the Council.

The content of the Council’s website is managed by the Clerk. However, it is the responsibility of all Councillors to check it regularly for any issues of inaccuracy or omissions and inform the Clerk if issues arise.

10. Council Meetings

Time will be allocated for a public session prior to the formal start of the meeting.

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 so to do.

The Agenda and Minutes of the meetings are published on the council website following approval at a council meeting.

Agenda items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Groups

- 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.
- 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.

Correspondence with external parties

- All correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed to the Clerk.
- Councillors should forward any correspondence received to the Clerk.
- No individual Parish Councillor should communicate directly with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries should be 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.