



Eccleshall

Parish Council

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

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Related Council policies (available on the Council's website):

Standing Orders of the Eccleshall Parish Council

Parish Council Code of Conduct

Complaints Procedure

1. Aim of the policy

The Communication Policy aims to:

- a) ensure that key messages about the Council's work are shared with residents and other local stakeholders (local businesses, organisations and community groups, etc.);
- b) encourage the Council to provide information, elicit feedback and engage with the community;
- c) clarify the roles, responsibilities and duties of the officers and members of the Council;
- d) encourage individual Councillors to communicate with, and be receptive to communications from, residents within the Wards that they represent;
- e) provide guidance to officers and members of the Council on how to handle media interest in a professional and objective manner;

- f) enable the Council to better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities accordingly;
- g) maintain residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence in the Council by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the Parish, and the wider Borough/County area;
- h) assist the Council to be an effective voice of the community;
- i) ensure that inaccuracies and misrepresentations concerning the Council or the community are appropriately responded to by the Council;
- j) ensure that communications comply with laws concerning privacy, freedom of information, unlawful discrimination and defamation.

2. General Principles and expectations

The following general principles and expectations apply to all communications, regardless of the mode of communication used (verbal, written, digital/online, etc.), and apply equally to Parish Councillors, the Clerk and Assistant Clerk of the Council, and to members of the public who communicate with the Council, Councillors and Council staff:

- a) Those sending written communications should recognise that they may be required by law to be publicly disclosed. Even if sent electronically, and subsequently deleted, they can often still be retrieved and may be publicly disclosable.
- b) Communications, even if marked private or confidential, might at some point need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.
- c) Communications may not be confidential but may include sensitive information that needs to be respected.
- d) Communications should always respect the legal rights to privacy, non-discrimination and dignity of others. Communications that might be construed as offensive, hostile, threatening, discriminatory, defamatory or otherwise unlawful (e.g. breach of copyright, bullying, harassment), should be avoided. Unnecessary negative or hostile comments about an individual should also be avoided.
- e) Always make clear who you are, and in what capacity you are writing or speaking. Do not hide your identity or commit any form of 'identity theft'.
- f) Anonymous communications should not be sent, although the person communicating can request that their identity not be disclosed to anyone other than the person(s) to whom the communication is sent. Such a request should be respected whenever possible (i.e. unless such disclosure is required by law). The Council, its members and staff will not acknowledge or consider, under any circumstances, informal or formal correspondence that is submitted anonymously.

- g) Individual Parish Councillors and Parish Council staff are responsible for what they post online in a Parish Council capacity, and should be objective, balanced, informative, respectful and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.
- h) Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media that denigrates Parish Councillors, Parish Council staff or residents should report them to the Clerk of the Parish Council.

3. Methods of external communication used by the Parish Council

- a) Members of the public should feel free to communicate with the Council, individual Councillors, the Clerk and Assistant Clerk through any mode of communication that is convenient for them.
- b) Communications intended for the attention of the Council should be addressed to the Clerk of the Council, who is the Proper Officer of the Council, preferably by e-mail (at clerk@eccleshallparishcouncil.co.uk), by telephone (01785) 282296, or via post to 16 Newport Road, Great Bridgeford, Stafford ST18 9PR.
- c) The Proper Officer (the Clerk) has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies.

The Council uses the following modes of communication to communicate with members of the public:

3.1 Council Meetings

Other than in exceptional circumstances requiring privacy, all Council meetings, and Council Committee meetings, are held in public. Early on in each meeting is a “Public Participation” agenda item, during which members of the public are entitled to make presentations to the Council or its Committees. (See *Standing Order* 3(e), (f), (g), ((h) and (ha) at <https://eccleshallparishcouncil.co.uk/finances-and-documents/general-publications/>)

3.2 Email (see 3(b) above)

The Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

3.3 Letters (See 3(b) above)

All official correspondence is sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letterheaded paper, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Council.

3.4 Public Consultations and Annual Meetings

The Council will engage with and provide opportunity for public consultations where appropriate to the scale of the topic and utilise the Annual Public Parish Meeting to present current issues and new projects to the community to encourage discussion and feedback.

3.5 Notice boards

Council information on meetings and local interest posters are displayed in the six Parish notice boards that are located around the Parish.

The blue notice board in the High Street will display general notices for local community groups.

3.6 Council Website

Information is published on the website as and when required. The website is reviewed regularly and kept as up to date as possible to ensure residents find the site informative. Information includes:

- Meeting agendas
- Minutes of previous Council meetings (to include draft minutes)
- Annual reports
- Annual returns
- Monthly financial reports
- Newsletters
- Details of how to contact the Council
- Councillor details
- Council policies

Where possible, the website and its contents conform to accessibility legislation as detailed in the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018. The website accessibility statement provides guidance as to the accessibility of the website and provides contact details should information be required in an alternative format.

3.7 Telephone Enquiries (see 3(b) above)

3.8 Social Media

- a) The Council maintains a Facebook page. It uses the page to:
- Advertise meeting dates and signpost to agendas and minutes which are available on the website
 - Publicise Parish Council events and activities
 - Provide new information from the Parish Council
 - Promote links to news stories on the Parish website
 - Advertise Parish Council vacancies

- Re-post and share information from partner agencies such as other local authorities, Police, library services, health organisations etc.
 - Post or share information from other relevant local pages such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities.
- b) It is understood that social media platforms operate 24/7, however it is not expected that they will be monitored continuously and not all comments will be individually responded to.
- c) Sending a message via the website or social media will not be considered as contacting the Parish Council for official purposes but messages will be monitored by the Clerk and a response provided where possible. If the communication is deemed relevant then it may be referred to in official meetings for the benefit of updating the Council on issues of potential importance.
- d) Views expressed by others that remain present on the website or a social media platform are not necessarily endorsed by the Council and the Parish Council is not responsible for the accuracy of content posted by others, nor does it accept any responsibility or liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred as a result of reliance upon information posted online.
- e) The Clerk has the authority to remove from Council social media pages any comments or content that includes:
- Obscene or racist content
 - Personal attacks, insults or threatening language
 - Defamatory or potentially libellous statements
 - Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
 - Private/personal information published without consent.
 - Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
 - Commercial promotions or spam
 - Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

3.9 Parish Council Crest

The Parish Council's logo is used as a brand to identify the Council and the parish as a whole. The logo is owned by the Council and can only be used with the Council's express permission.

3.10 Contact with the Media (print, audio or visual)

- a) Proactive media releases may be issued to promote a decision or work of the Council.
- b) Reactive press releases may be prepared and issued 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.

- c) Regular columns in the Staffordshire Newsletter and the Stone and Eccleshall Gazette provide information about Council decisions and activities, as well as significant Parish events.

3.11 Parish Newsletter

- a) The Council produces an A5 biannual newsletter. The work is undertaken by the Clerk in conjunction with the Council editorial team and circulated to Full Council prior to publication.
- b) The newsletter consists of articles from local community groups and the Council. Only the known opinions of the Council will be expressed.
- c) Advertising is not included. Sponsorship is accepted.

3.12 Informal meetings or focus groups with community groups/businesses/services and specialist groups

The Council proactively provides opportunities for informal meetings and focus groups in order to gain an understanding of current issues, present new projects to the community to encourage discussion and explore potential for partnership working. It responds positively to requests for such meetings by community members and groups, local businesses and organisations. It is expected that more than one councillor is involved in any of these meetings, and a councillor cannot make any decisions/agree a course of action without bringing the item back to full Council for consideration.

4. Policy regarding communications between individual Council members and staff and members of the public and media.

- a) Councillors will frequently be approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email. Communications with individual Councillors, if not verbally in person, should be directed to them via their official contact details which can be found on the Council website at <https://eccleshallparishcouncil.co.uk/council-information/council-members/>
- b) Council staff and members of the Council are expected to respond to communications from members of the public in a timely manner. It is noted that the Clerk works part-time and instant responses are not always possible from either Councillors or staff. If time is required to respond, this should be explained to the person making the enquiry.
- c) Councillors are expected to bear in mind that how enquiries from the public are dealt with by the Councillor will reflect on the Council. When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk should be sought.

- d) Councillors' views expressed in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the Parish Council at a Council or committee meeting may be perceived as pre-disposition, pre-determination or bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at Council meetings. While it is perfectly acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and information, Councillors should ensure they retain an open mind and avoid public comment that might give the perception of having reached a conclusion before the matter is discussed in Council.
- e) 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 and keep the enquirer informed about it.
- f) Unless specifically authorised by the Council to communicate on the Council's behalf on a particular matter, Councillors must always make it clear in any communications with members of the public or the media that they are not to be taken as speaking or writing on behalf of the Council.
- g) Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Parish Council.
- h) All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to the Council, e.g. the enquiry may be more appropriately made to another tier of local authority. If so, the Councillor should advise the enquirer of this.
- a. 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 Council or committee agenda
 - Investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.
 - Advise the enquirer to raise the matter directly with the Council via the Clerk
 - Recommend that the enquirer attend a Council meeting and raise the matter during the Public Participation part of the meeting.
- a) Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on Council-related matters reflects the decisions and policies of the Council, regardless of the Councillor's individual views on any subject. The Council will agree its statements for release to the press and social media.
- b) All Councillors are provided with a Council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business. This email address should be used for communications with members of the public on Council-related matters. Use of personal email addresses is discouraged. The Council expects all Officers and Councillors to use e-mail in a courteous, reasonable, responsible and respectful manner.

- c) E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk when related to Council business.
- d) Councillors should be aware that emails related to Council business received or sent by the Council's Proper Officer, staff or members may be disclosed following a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or following a subject access request under the Data Protection Act 2018, under the General Data Protection Regulations or in the course of legal proceedings.
- e) Users are reminded that emails have the same status in law as any other written correspondence and are subject to the same legal implications.
- f) When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed to a court or tribunal or to the Information Commissioner, because in some circumstances that could happen.
- g) Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the Councillor should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.
- h) Council letterheaded paper must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the Council and must not be used to convey personal views. Council letterheaded paper is used by the Clerk and authorised staff in the day to day running of the Council and its interests.
- i) Members of staff will be required to communicate both verbally and in writing on a regular basis with the community as part of their duties, by telephone or using the Council email address with which they have been provided. It is imperative that staff always handle such communication with courtesy and professionalism .
- j) Councillors who have taken on responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall provide a copy of any such communications to the Clerk.
- k) All correspondence intended for the Council should be addressed to the Clerk. Councillors should forward any correspondence they have received to the Clerk.
- l) No individual Parish Councillor should initiate direct communication with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship unless authorised by the Council to do so. All enquiries should be through the Clerk.
- m) 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 follow due procedure relating to freedom of information requests.

4.1 Dealing with the Media

When dealing with the media:

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

- b) If appropriate, for a specific issue, the Chairman may authorise another Councillor to make a statement on behalf of the Council. In situations where short notice means the Chairman is not available, Councillors should contact the Clerk for advice.
- c) All media comment must accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- d) All decisions of the Council made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media.
- e) The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able speak with some authority, using plain English.
- f) Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from the Council's Solicitor before any response is made.
- g) Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement' to the media must clearly inform the media:
 - a. that their comments are made as an individual and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council;
 - b. that other Councillors may hold a different view;
 - c. that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by the Council.
- h) The Clerk is the Council's first point of contact for the media (see contact details, above). All media enquiries should be directed to the Clerk, or the Chair.
- i) Individual councillors are not permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the 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.
- j) Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.
- k) Letters or articles representing the views of the Council are only submitted by the Parish Clerk if they have been specifically approved by Council or in conjunction with the Chair if the article is to share views previously resolved views of the Council.
- l) Councillors and staff should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

5. Policy regarding Internal Council Communication

- a) 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.

- b) Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for “information only”, this information will be circulated via the Clerk.
- c) Correspondence from the Clerk marked “Confidential” must be treated as such and not be disclosed to anyone other than those to whom it is addressed.

5.2 Communications with Parish Council Staff

No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the council, the Chair of a committee or other meeting, may give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub- committee with appropriate delegated powers from the council). Instructions must not be inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.

5.3 Email messages:

- a) Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk or Assistant Clerk
- b) Reasons for urgency should be stated
- c) Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk
- d) Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

5.4 Meetings with the Clerk or other officers

- a) Wherever possible an appointment should be made.
- b) Meetings with the Assistant Clerk should be arranged with the Clerk.
- c) Meetings should be relevant to the work of the Clerk, Assistant Clerk or other officer.
- d) Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not purely related to a personal agenda.

6. Ensuring compliance

Councillors, Council staff and members of the public who have received communications that they believe are not in compliance with this policy should report this to the Clerk, who will in turn report this to the Chair of the Council.

The Chair, in consultation with the Clerk and the Deputy Chair and , if necessary, the Council’s solicitor, may respond in one or more of the following ways, depending on their view of the seriousness of the breach.

- a) **If the communication was sent by a member of the Council staff**

With regards to the Clerk, the complaint will be reported to the Chair of the Staffing Committee and dealt with as an employment matter and in line with the complaints procedure.

In the first instance, issues with other staff are reported to the Clerk as the line manager.

Any formal complaints should be dealt with by the Staffing Committee.

Appropriate training should be provided if needed.

b) If the communication was sent by a Councillor other than the Chair or Deputy Chair of the Council

Complaints are handled in line with the Council's complaints procedure. This procedure is designed for those complaints that cannot be satisfactorily resolved by less formal measures or explanations provided by the relevant parties.

c) If the communication was sent by a member of the public to a staff member of the Council, or to one or more councillors

A copy of the communication should be provided to the Clerk. The nature and seriousness of the issue will govern the response and appropriate legal advice will be taken where necessary before a response is provided.

d) If the communication was sent by the Chair or Deputy Chair of the Council, the following process will be followed:

Complaints are handled in line with the Council's complaints procedure. This procedure is designed for those complaints that cannot be satisfactorily resolved by less formal measures or explanations provided by the relevant parties.

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