

Steyping Parish Council

Communications Protocol

1. INTRODUCTION

This Protocol has been drawn up in accordance with the “Governance Toolkit for Parish and Town Councils” prepared as a partner publication by Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, Society of Local Council Clerks, and NALC.

2. AIMS

The Communications Protocol aims to help Steyping Parish Council communicate effectively and impartially.

3. GENERAL PRINCIPLES (COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE MEDIA AND MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC)

3.1 The Council's communications will be open and transparent in dealing with the media.

The purpose of press releases is to increase public awareness of the Parish Council's activities. All press releases must be submitted by the Clerk, who will consult the Chair or Vice-Chair, or the Parish Council as the corporate body when drafting the press release.

3.2 Proactive media releases will be issued to promote a decision or work of the Parish Council.

Reactive press releases will 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.

Other press releases will report the decisions and outcomes of the Council's activities, and explain the reasons for them.

3.3 The media may on occasions attempt to by-pass the Clerk; however, it is essential that all communications are co-ordinated and managed through the Clerk. Where Parish Councillors are contacted direct by the media, they should refer them to the Clerk.

3.4 The Parish Council occasionally works with partners, mostly from the public sector, and in these circumstances, their contribution should be acknowledged.

3.5 Press reports from the Parish Council, its committees or working groups shall, in general, be sent from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.

3.6 Unless a Parish Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, Parish Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that any views they express are personal and request that this be clearly reported as their personal view.

3.7 Unless a Parish 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. [The only clear way of being aware of the Council's view is if the matter has been discussed at a Parish Council meeting, and a decision made on that item.]

3.8 Press releases will not be used to comment on national political debates unless of specific relevance to this Parish Council.

3.9 All media releases issued by the Council will include a quotation from the Chairman (or, in his/her absence, the Vice-Chairman, if there is one); if it is not possible to contact the Chairman or Vice-Chairman a quotation will be attributed to the Chairman.

3.10 The Clerk will usually be the first point of contact for the media; however, where it is appropriate for an elected Member to represent the Parish Council, the Chairman or Vice-Chairman shall be authorised as the official spokesperson for the Council.

3.11 Individual Members will not be permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council. In the restricted period before an election, commonly known as “purdah” media releases will not include quotes from Members who are due for re-election.

4. PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

4.1 The first point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed.

4.2 The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.

4.3 No individual Parish Councillor should communicate direct with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship.

4.4 No individual Parish Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council (or its committees/sub-committees). [In particular, Parish Councillors do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a “need to know”.] See 5.1

4.5 All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Parish Council, using Council letter-headed paper or by e-mail.

4.6 Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

4.7 Correspondence sent on behalf of the Parish Council to Horsham District Council shall also be copied to the two District Councillors.

4.8 Any emails to external parties, from the Parish Council, should make it clear at the end of the email that it has come from the Parish Council

5. PARISH COUNCILLOR CORRESPONDENCE WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES

5.1 The Clerk sends out the Council’s correspondence to other bodies, and correspondence from individual Parish Councillors, on Parish Council business, should be avoided; however, there may be

exceptional situations when it is appropriate for a Parish Councillor to issue correspondence in his/her own name. Such correspondence must be authorised by the Parish Council and the correspondence must make it clear that it has been written in an official capacity. All such correspondence should be copied to the Clerk (see 4.4 and 4.5).

6. AGENDAS FOR PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS

6.1 In accordance with Paragraph 1 (4) (a) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, agendas will be published no later than 3 clear days before a meeting (this excludes the day of publication and the day of the meeting – Saturdays are included within this calculation).

6.2 Where the Clerk or a Parish Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters “for information only” in respect of items on the agenda, this will be circulated via the Clerk.

Note: This applies to items on the agenda only. Parish Councillors are entitled to share any other information they wish, with their colleagues. In these circumstances, it can be helpful for the Clerk to be copied in.

7. GENERAL GUIDANCE

7.1 Steyning Parish Council is apolitical. There should be no material used which attempts to promote the personal image of a particular Councillor, promote an individual Councillor’s proposals or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the Council assist in the publication of any material which does any of the above.

8. LEGAL MATTERS

8.1 Defamation: This term covers libel (written) and slander (spoken) and relates to the publication of any untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation.

8.2 Data Protection: Avoid publishing the personal data and/or images of individuals unless their written permission has been obtained. **When e-mailing two or more recipients, be sure to ‘blind copy’ all recipients in order to avoid making the contact details of others available to all.**

8.3 Prejudice and Pre-determination: Councillors should avoid expressing prejudice or pre-determination on any topic due to be discussed and agreed by the Parish Council.

8.4 Copyright: Placing images or text on the website, from a copy-righted source without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything unless permission has been granted. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against the Parish Council.

8.5 Obscene Material: It is a criminal offence to publish or access obscene material.

9. Code of Conduct Implications:

9.1 Councillors may have a social media account on which they comment as both an individual and a Councillor. It must at all times be made clear whether Councillors are posting as individuals or in their capacity as a Councillor. Aspects of the Members’ Code of Conduct apply as much to on-line activity as

they do to other written or oral communication. On-line content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the Internet is permanent.

9.2 Comments should be respectful and informative, never condescending or “loud”. “Loud” is when capital letters are used. Use sentence-case format.

9.3 Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language which could be deemed as offensive, especially in respect of race, sexuality disability etc. should not be published on any social media website.

9.4 Avoid personal attack, on-line fights and hostile communications.

9.5 Never use a member of public’s name unless you have permission.

9.6 Respect the privacy of other Councillors and residents.

9.7 Be aware not to publish anything which violates laws or regulations.

9.8 In the main, Councillors have the same legal duties on-line as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. Extra care needs to be taken for electoral campaigning and when writing on planning matters.

9.9 The Parish Council Newsletter and Website will remain the main tools for the purposes of communicating information regarding the Parish Council’s activities.

Steyning Parish Council

Agreed by Full Council 08.06.15