

GREAT BOWDEN PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Adopted 08/10/2015

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1.0 Introduction

Great Bowden Parish Council has undertaken to 'communicate, consult and engage'. The purpose of this policy is therefore to set out how the Council intends to achieve this and develop and improve its communications in the future.

The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what we do, while also enabling the council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

2.0 Communication

2.1 WHY IS COMMUNICATION IMPORTANT?

Local government communications have, over the past few years, increasingly focused on reputation. Improved communications lead to recognition and respect – reputation **does** matter. Many councils fail to effectively communicate who they are and what they do – and the less people know about an organisation, the less likely they are to rate it highly.

The Parish Council, through good communication will understand and better meet the needs of the community, whilst also raising the profile of the village and the parish council

Good communications will enable the council to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about services provided by the Council.
- raise the profile of Great Bowden as a destination
- attract businesses/employment to the village
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young and old people
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of the council

2.2 WHAT SHOULD WE BE COMMUNICATING?

There are two methods of communicating:

- Proactive – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
- Reactive – giving residents information they have requested

Research by MORI, an independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, suggests that the most important drivers of council reputation among local residents are:

- perceived quality of services overall

- perceived value for money
- media coverage
- direct communications
- council performance
- a clean, green and safe environment
- positive experiences of contact with council representatives

If the council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its proactive and reactive communications.

2.3 WHO SHOULD WE BE COMMUNICATING WITH?

The council's audiences are wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents
- Harborough District Councillors and staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young and old people
- The media
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- MPs
- Other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the area

2.4 HOW SHOULD WE BE COMMUNICATING?

The council will ensure that information is easily accessible, relevant and timely and recognises the importance of communication and commits to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

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 considered in order to communicate effectively with everyone.

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

Currently communication is achieved through:

- The Council's website
- Council agenda papers/correspondence
- Village newsletter
- Village notice board
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultation

Ways in which communication could be improved:

- Improved visibility of the council and its activities by more frequent reporting
- Manage local media more effectively by proactive use of a template press release document to reduce factual errors in reporting.
 - All committee chairmen will regularly update the press release document on committee activity.
 - The updated press template must be approved by Chairman of the Council/Parish Clerk prior to release
- The introduction of a regular Parish Council drop in session on the months when a Parish Council meeting is not held
- Extending the reach of posted notices to local business premises (Pubs and both shops), Church porch notice board, Village Hall, Community Pavilion
- Placing copies of the Village Newsletter in locations such as the Church, Pubs and both shops
- Improved communication, by means of regular meetings, with relevant Harborough District Councillors
- Continue to improve the council's website to make it more user friendly including capturing data for a communication database
- Use of social media such as Facebook
- Better promotion of the council's online presence, by setting up a Google Group or Mail Chimp as another channel to disseminate information
- Inviting the local paper (currently Harborough Mail) to council meetings
- Announcing council meetings on local radio (currently HFM)
- Comments boxes located throughout the village, at sites such as the Church, Pubs, Deli and Community Pavilion
- A5 leaflets available at the Church, Pubs and both shops giving main issue headlines and contact details (website, drop in sessions, comments boxes)
- Regular consultation with the community and feedback to them on subsequent analysis including actions resulting from the consultation. i.e. You said this and We did that.

2.4.1 Press - manage the media more effectively

The media plays a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital.

The Communities and Local Government report found people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local media. Whilst good relationships already exist, there is always room for improvement.

All communication to the media by councillors in their Great Bowden Parish Council role must be sent to the Parish Clerk or the Chairman of the Council for approval.

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 Parish Clerk or the Chairman
- Evaluate media coverage
- Issue timely and relevant press releases
- Pre-empt potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR (where possible)
- Ensure all media contact is with the Parish Clerk or Chairman (or in their absence, the Vice Chairman) as per Standing Orders.

2.4.2 Online presence - Improve the council’s website

The council’s website is to be regularly updated and is as much as possible kept up to date.

It is important to work out strategies for keeping the website up to date and for ensuring good links with local businesses and community groups.

2.4.3 More frequent and effective use of social media

To promote the use of social media, such as Facebook in order to promote the activities of the Council. If it is agreed that these are accepted methods of promotion of the Council’s activities then a social media policy will be needed together with an agreement as to by whom and when messages will be posted.

2.4.4 Better promotion of the council’s online presence

All communications should promote the Council’s website if appropriate its social media accounts.

It is important to ensure that links to our website are provided from other key partners, especially Harborough District Council

Google Groups or Mail Chimp can be a good way of people getting up to date information directly to their email, and this should be utilised as another channel to communication

2.4.5 Public Consultation - Carry out regular and effective consultation

At present, most of the council’s consultation is by way of occasional questionnaires on specific subjects and members interaction with the public.

The council needs to establish means by which consultations will take place to cover all aspects of life in Great Bowden so that a full understanding of the needs of the community is developed. An action plan and council priorities can then be developed, which will be reviewed annually. The in-depth consultation will be repeated every four years. This will help to ensure that the council is engaged, delivering relevant

services and truly representing the needs of the community to other authorities/partners. The information obtained will also help to provide useful evidence in support of initiatives and funding bids.

In addition, regular (annual) consultation should be undertaken by councillors to gather public opinion on perception and satisfaction of the council and the work it does. The results of this consultation would also help to better understand the council's strengths and weaknesses and would help the council to measure the effectiveness of its work in general and this strategy specifically.

The consultations need to be developed in such a way that there is an opportunity for all members of the community to engage in the process. Therefore an analysis of the format of this consultation needs to be undertaken including:

- **Who** – develop an understanding of the demographics of the community and
- **How** - establish ways of communicating with each of these that best encourages their engagement in the process
- **What** – consider what information is required and develop relevant means of achieving this whilst still being appropriate, accessible and engaging
- **Where** – define the best locations for accessing and engaging with the different groups identified
- **When** – develop a timetable for the consultation process including when it is intended to hold consultation 'events'

Once completed, strategies for delivering services and improvements where identified should be developed with annual consultations held to measure effectiveness of the council's activities and reputation and a review of the in-depth consultation every four years.

Furthermore, once a significant on-line database has been achieved, electronic questionnaires can be issued to help with the consultation process.

2.5 WHO (FROM THE COUNCIL) SHOULD BE COMMUNICATING?

It is imperative that:

- all communication from the council is courteous, timely, professional, appropriate and reflects the decisions and policies of the council
- all individuals communicating on behalf of the council are aware that every piece of communication reflects on the reputation of the council in the community.

Staff and councillors are ambassadors of the council and must remember this in all communications.

2.5.1 Parish Clerk

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

Written communication: all councillors and the Parish Clerk will be provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

The clerk is required to include a 'signature' as part of all email communication so that their name, position and contact information is provided.

When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the parish clerk will be sought.

Verbal communication: members of the council will be required to communicate on a regular basis with the community as part of their duties. It is imperative that members of the council handle all such communication with courtesy and professionalism at all times.

Any member of the council who is unsure of how to handle difficult, angry or vexatious complainants will be provided with the necessary training to ensure a positive outcome from such situations.

2.5.2 Councillors

Elected members will be regularly approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. How enquiries from the public are dealt with by councillors will reflect on the council. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

At no time should councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to promise to investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to the parish council. Depending on the issue raised 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

All communication *must* be responded to and the correspondent kept apprised of progress. The procedure for doing so is as follows:

1. having received an enquiry/complaint, the councillor should acknowledge receipt (if in writing) and advise of what action is intended to be taken within one week of receipt
2. advise when that action has been taken and what to expect next (ie a response is now awaited from (a third party)
3. report back on the outcome of the enquiry or ensure that either the third party or the parish clerk will/has report(ed) back on the matter

Councillors must ensure that any all communication with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of the council regardless of the councillors own views on any subject.

Any and all enquires by the media should be referred immediately to the parish clerk or chairman of the council.

3.0 Evaluation

It is extremely important that the council measures the success of this strategy so that it may inform any future plan. A benchmark of the current state will be required.

What communication improvements can we measure?

- Media's assessment of Great Bowden Parish Council's communication coverage
- Raised awareness of the Parish Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes of all stakeholders towards Great Bowden Parish Council
- Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes
- Increased attendance at Public meeting and organized events.

How will we do this?

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys
- Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content usage
- Hits on website
- Number of Likes and Followers on Social Networking sites (if applicable)

This Policy was approved at a meeting of the Parish Council.

Clerk of the council.....

Date.....

Date of next review
