

ABBOTS LEIGH PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

1.0 Introduction

Abbots Leigh Parish Council has a duty to 'communicate, consult and engage'. The purpose of this policy is therefore to set out how the Council intends to achieve this.

Current communications include the Annual Parish Meeting, regular council meetings, the web site, occasional press releases that are picked up by local press and parish consultations.

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 our villages 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.
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with groups that might not ordinarily engage with the parish council
- 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 – informing residents of relevant Parochial matters
- Reactive – giving residents information they have requested

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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 employees

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
- Parish Council staff
- The media
- Higher tier authorities
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- MP & MEP's
- 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. The council recognises the importance of communication and commits to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

Different forms of communication will appeal to 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.

Currently communication is achieved through:

- Press releases picked up by local news
- The Council's website
- Council agenda papers/correspondence
- The Annual Parish Meeting
- Clerk interaction
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultations

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2.4.1 Press - manage the media 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 Abbots Leigh Parish Council role must be sent to the Parish Clerk 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” in response to a specific question
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Parish Clerk
- 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

2.4.2 Online presence

The council’s website is regularly updated and is as much as possible kept up to date. There is an opportunity for local residents to submit photographs to be used on the web site.

2.4.3 Use of social media

A social media policy provides guidelines for the Clerk and appointed Councillors to also post council activities on social media, if official parish council accounts are created.

2.4.4 Promotion of the council’s online presence

Currently all correspondence or publications promote our website. Links to our website are provided from other key partners including North Somerset Council and Avon & Somerset Police Authority.

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2.4.5 Public Consultation

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

The consultations need to be delivered in such a way that there is an opportunity for all members of the community to engage in the process. Therefore, for new consultations, the following questions will be considered:

- Who – develop an understanding of the demographics of the community
- 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'

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 Council staff

The Parish Council clerk communicates on a regular basis with members of the community and has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication.

Written communication: all staff with administrative duties will be provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

Staff are 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.

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

Any staff member who is unsure of how to handle difficult, angry or vexatious complainants should refer to the Vexatious Correspondence and Complaints Policy.

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:

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

Councillors must ensure that 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 enquiries by the media should be referred immediately to the parish clerk.

This policy was reviewed on 14th April 2025.

End of policy