

Great Hale Parish Council

Communications Policy

This Communications Policy was last reviewed & amended at the Meeting of the Council on 9 April 2018 where it was combined with the relevant aspects of the Social Media Policy.

1. Aim

- 1.1. The aim of this Policy is to state the requirements of, and provide guidance for, all Great Hale Parish Council ("the Council") internal and external communications. This includes, but is not limited to, communications between Councillors, the Clerk, employees, suppliers, contractors, external organisations, the Press and public.

2. Parish Council Correspondence

- 2.1. The point of contact for the Council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the parish council should be addressed.
- 2.2. The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- 2.3. All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letter headed paper.
- 2.4. 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.
- 2.5. No individual Councillor or Officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the parish council, a committee, sub-committee or working party.
- 2.6. Councillors and Officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.

3. Communications with the Press and Public

- 3.1. The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the press, with the Chair of the council or relevant committee.
- 3.2. Press reports from the council, its committees or working parties should be from the Clerk or an officer, or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- 3.3. Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the council to speak to the press on a particular issue, Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view.
- 3.4. Unless a 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.
- 3.5. For more details on communicating and maintaining relations with the Press, refer to Annex A of this Policy.
- 3.6. Any complaints from the press or a member of public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure, or via a council agenda item.

4. Communication with the Parish

- 4.1. The Council will keep residents informed of its activities, projects, forthcoming events and public information, including County and District Council activities through the Website, Noticeboards and Minutes.
- 4.2. The Parish will also be informed through the Public Forum which precedes a Council Meeting.

5. Councillor Correspondence to external parties

- 5.1. Wherever possible, the Clerk should send all council correspondence.
- 5.2. Councillors should recognise that the views they express must be those of the Council and not their own.
- 5.3. If a councillor is required to correspond with external parties, he/she must:
 - 5.3.1. Make clear that it is written in their official capacity;
 - 5.3.2. Express the views of the Council
 - 5.3.3. Be authorised or delegated to do so by the parish council.
- 5.4. If not, the councillor must state that the views expressed are their own personal views and not those of the Council.
- 5.5. A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk and noted accordingly on the correspondence (e.g. "copy to the Clerk"), so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.
- 5.6. The Clerk will keep a copy of all letters. Letters will be scanned and stored electronically where possible.

6. Communications with Parish Council Employees or Contractors

- 6.1. 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 the Clerk or to another employee or contractor which are inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- 6.2. Councillors must not give instructions to any employee or contractor, unless authorised to do so and with appropriate delegated powers from the council.
- 6.3. Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Council. The date, time and details of the conversation should be recorded if the topic is specifically related to a decision or contract.

7. Electronic communications

- 7.1. Electronic communications, such as e-mails, are subject to the same requirements as a letter or telephone call.
- 7.2. It is the Clerk's responsibility to keep councillors without internet access informed of the Council's business.
- 7.3. Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk. Reasons for urgency should be stated.
- 7.4. Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk.
- 7.5. E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk.
- 7.6. Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

7.7. Emails relating to Council business may be subject to Freedom of Information requests.

7.8. The Clerk will retain a record of e-mails of significance.

8. Social Media

8.1. 'Social media' is the term commonly given to websites and online tools which allow users to interact with each other in some way by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. Examples of social media websites include:

8.1.1. Social networking (e.g. www.facebook.com)

8.1.2. Video sharing (e.g. www.youtube.com)

8.1.3. Micro-blogging (e.g. www.twitter.com)

8.2. The Parish Council does not have any designated Social Media Accounts.

8.3. Councillors may share key information about Parish Council Activities on the Great Hale Facebook for the sole purpose of publishing information about the work of the Parish Council to a wider audience subject to the following conditions:

8.3.1. Prior approval must be granted by a Council resolution. Urgent information can be published by the Clerk in accordance with 3.1 above.

8.3.2. Social Media must NOT be used in the recruitment process for employees or new councillors, other than for the sole purpose of placing vacancy advertisements.

8.3.3. Councillors should be familiar with the terms of use and adhere to these at all times.

8.3.4. No information should be published that is not already known to be in the public domain i.e. available on the Council's website, contained in minutes of meetings, stated in publicised policies and procedures.

8.3.5. Information that is published should be factual, fair, thorough and transparent.

8.3.6. Everyone must be mindful that information published in this way may stay in the public domain indefinitely, without the opportunity for retrieval/deletion.

8.3.7. Copyright laws must be respected.

8.3.8. Conversations or reports that are meant to be private or internal must not be published without permission.

8.3.9. Other organisations should not be referenced without their approval.

8.3.10. Do not publish anything that would be regarded in the workplace as unacceptable.

9. Meetings

9.1. Councillors are summoned to attend Public Meetings by the Clerk. Only exceptional reasons for non-attendance will be accepted by the Council.

9.2. The Clerk will notify councillors of the Agenda, date, time and location of the Meeting.

9.3. The Public are invited to attend all Meetings.

9.4. The Press are welcome to attend Council Meetings.

9.5. Any recording or filming of the proceedings must be submitted in advance to the Clerk, and the Chairman notified prior to the meeting.

9.6. The Council must meet all reasonable requests to accommodate the press and respect the privacy of any attending public.

9.7. In the situation where Council business is discussed in closed session, the Council may be approached for comment on items discussed, with due respect to the confidentiality issues.

- 9.8. The requirements and procedures of a Meeting are detailed in the Council's Standing Orders.
- 9.9. Outside of the Meetings, any informal or progress meeting with councillors, the Clerk or other officers should be:
 - 9.9.1. By appointment wherever possible;
 - 9.9.2. Relevant to the work of that particular officer;
 - 9.9.3. Made clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

10. Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Parties

- 10.1. An Agenda should be clear and concise and contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision.
- 10.2. The public should be able to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- 10.3. Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- 10.4. Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

Annex A to Communication Policy

Guidance on Press Relations

Aim

1. The Aim of Press Relations is to:
 - a. Develop a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between the Council and the press.
 - b. Explain the Council's policies to the local community.
 - c. Communicate important public information messages.
 - d. Provide transparency of the Council's actions and enable the public to take part in the Council's work.
2. It is the responsibility of all Members and Officers to ensure that effective Press Relations are maintained.

Requirements

3. Officers and Members should have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in any dealings with the press.
4. Confidential documents, reports and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the press without prior Council approval.
5. The Council's Publication Scheme specifies the information that it publishes or intends to publish, as required by the Freedom of Information Act 2000.
6. The Council reserves the right to withhold certain sensitive information as guided by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Data Protection Act 1998 and exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.
7. Professional guidance should be taken before any response is made to the press concerning personal privacy information relating to Members and Officers.
8. Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation, or both.
9. Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council should be handled with particular care.
10. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments.
11. Publicity should not attach nor appear to undermine generally accepted moral standards.
12. Press comments must accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic as adopted in Minutes or Policies.
13. All decisions of the Council made in an Open Meeting can be quoted and made available to the press.

14. Councillors should not make personal comments which could damage the reputation of the Council or negatively affect the credibility of the Council or other members.
15. Professional advice should be taken on matters which are or are likely to be subject to legal proceedings.
16. Councillors wishing to make a “Personal Statement” must clearly inform the press that:
 - a. “their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of the Council”
 - b. “Other Councillors may hold a different view”
 - c. “The matter is still being discussed or resolved by the Council”

Responding to Press Approaches

17. All press, radio or TV approaches should be directed in the first instance to the Clerk who will discuss the nature of the story and if appropriate direct the enquiry to the Chairman or other Councillor.
18. All requests for feature articles or broadcast interview or debates should be made through the Clerk.

Proactive Publicity

19. The Council also has a duty to inform the public how their Council Tax is spent.
20. The Council presents its Draft Budget at an annual Meeting, reports its budget monitoring at Meetings at least quarterly and publicises its Annual Statement of Accounts.
21. The local press may receive copies of agendas for full Council Meetings and will be sent Press Releases regarding specific projects and initiatives.
22. Any Office or Councillor appointed as Spokesperson for the Council must be fully briefed on any issues that are likely to be complex or contentious before communicating with the press.
23. Press Releases must be issued via the Clerk or appointed Councillor to ensure that the principles outlined above are adhered to, to provide a consistency of style and to enable use of the Press Release to be monitored.
24. Written communication should be:
 - a. Authoritative, but not authoritarian
 - b. Communicative, but not irresponsible
 - c. Approachable, without being over-familiar
 - d. Accurate in terms of grammar, spelling and phraseology, but not old-fashioned
 - e. Concise, but not economical with the truth
 - f. Considered, but not withholding essential information.
 - g. Friendly, but not casual.

25. The Protocol for issuing a Press News Release is:
 - a. Identify potential news story
 - b. Preliminary discussion with relevant Officer or Member, if appropriate
 - c. Draft text in house style
 - d. Distribute the Press Release, with a copy to relevant Members and Officers
 - e. Post Press Release on Council website

Advice & Training

26. The Clerk will maintain a list of any Press contacts.
27. All Members and Officers who are expected to deal with the Press will be trained to the appropriate level and the Clerk will arrange training courses.