



HILLINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

Communications Policy

Parish Council Correspondence

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

The Clerk should deal with the correspondence and will ensure that information or direct enquiry is passed to Councillors as appropriate.

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 Group. In particular Councillors and Officers do not have the right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a “need to know”.

All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using letter headed paper.

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

Agenda items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Groups

Agendas should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision and for Councillors and the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.

Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.

Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for “information only”, this information should be circulated via the Clerk.

Communications with the Press and Public

The Clerk will discuss press reports, or comments to the media with appropriate Councillors or the Chairman. If the Chairman is absent the report or comments will be discussed with the Vice Chairman.

Press reports from the Council, its Committees, or Working Groups should be from the Clerk or an Officer or via the reporter’s own attendance at a meeting.

Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media 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 recorded as their personal view.

When responding to Social Media comments/statements the same should apply by advising that this is a personal view and not necessarily the view of the Council. When responding a Councillor should report that they are responding on a non- Councillor basis.

Unless a Councillor is absolutely that he/she is reporting the view of the Council, even if they did not agree with the decision when it was made, must make it clear to members of the public they are expressing a personal view.

If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with in accordance with the Council's adopted Complaints Policy.

Councillor Correspondence to external parties

As the clerk should be sending most of the Council's correspondence from the Council to other bodies, it needs to be made clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Parish Council unless it is an operational or other matter requiring the Clerk to respond by delegated authority as the Proper Officer.

Where after discussion with the Clerk, Members wish to pursue an initiative on an unofficial/individual basis they are welcome to do so but should be mindful;

- a) The need to take care not to give the impression that the initiative has the support of or represents official Council Policy;
- b) The dangers of public or other partners or external bodies expectations;
- c) Publicity or media coverage which may reflect on the Parish Council.

Accordingly, Members should make it clear that they are acting in an unofficial/personal capacity. As a general rule, individual Members should not approach another body, statutory, voluntary, or commercial organisation, other than in a personal capacity, seeking information which might be related to any Parish Council function.

Such approaches should be made formally by Parish Council staff on behalf of the Member in an official capacity. In this respect Members are advised to contact the Parish Clerk as above. If a Member is dissatisfied with the actions/advice of the Parish Clerk, she/he may ask for an item to be included on the agenda for a Council meeting or appropriate Committee.

A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or Councillors role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and be noted on the correspondence "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware the Clerk has been advised.

Communications with Parish Council Staff

Whilst all Members and Staff are encouraged to develop contact with each other, both Councillors and Staff need to be conscious of the "Employer" and "Employee" relationship and professional standards should be maintained at all times. Both should be aware that requests directly from Members to employees to action given matters whether established

Council policy or not, can disrupt established routines and work programmes and could confuse line management. Members wishing to have urgent action to taken should contact the Parish Clerk who can then re-schedule staff priorities if necessary.

Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless specifically authorised to do so (for example, 3 or more Councillors sitting as a Committee or Working Group with appropriate delegated authority from the Council). In such circumstances Members who wish to investigate or promote any issue for possible adoption and/or action should, in any event discuss the matter with the Clerk so that preliminary consideration can be given to the legal, financial, technical, and staffing implications and to the possible impact and relationship to existing projects or policies in which the Council is currently involved.

Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Parish Council.

Emails

Instant replies should not be expected; reasons for urgency should be stated; Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk.

E-mails from Councillors to external parties regarding Council business should be sent to the clerk first and best practice is for the Clerk to respond on behalf of the Council. Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

Meetings with the Clerk or other Officers

Wherever possible an appointment should be made.

Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer.

Councillors should be bear that the matter is legitimate council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

Social Media

Why do we need this policy?

There are far too many social media sites to list, but some of the most popular examples are: Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat. The format and levels of interaction vary greatly from one to another. Whenever Council representatives use such sites, they should familiarise themselves with the guidance that is set out in this policy.

We need to set clear guidelines for using social media sites to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communication mix and that their does not expose the Council to security risks or reputational damage. Therefore, we need a comprehensive policy to effectively manage and regulate the corporate response of social media.

Social media offers great potential for building relationships and improving the services that we provide. This policy will clearly set out how social media can be managed effectively and how any risks of pitfalls can be avoided or mitigated.

Why use social media?

- Social media has the advantage of reaching many people very quickly;
- It can be used for one-to-one communications and also one-to-one-to-many communications;
- Media is shared widely and quickly. It can easily spread beyond the original audience.
- Many devices can pick up this information;
- It can include text, photos, audio and video;
- It allows participants to engage as they wish. They can just view the content, comment on it or even create content themselves;
- Communication can be done in real time.

Why not use social media?

As with any online activity there are often risks associated, the following types of risk have been identified with social media use;

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites;
- Disclosure of confidential information;
- Damage to the reputation of the Council;
- Social engineering attacks (*this the act of manipulating people into disclosing confidential material or carrying out certain actions. Social engineering is often conducted by individuals fraudulently claiming to be a business or client*).
- Civil or Criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.

Whilst there are many advantages to using media as a tool to communicate with residents and the wider world, there are also disadvantages;

- Information is shared in the public domain, and it should be expected that it can be viewed by anyone in the world;
- There is often no need to register and view content. Content can be viewed anonymously; registration is only needed should one wish to actively participate;
- Once published it cannot be taken back. Expect anything published, even if later deleted, to be permanently online;
- Media is shared widely and quickly. It can easily spread beyond the intended audience;
- Communication is expected in real time. While some flexibility can be achieved by the publicising our operating times, respondents' expectations may remain fixed. There is no guarantee of truth. Gossip and misinformation exist and is easily spread online;
- There is a lot of information online and it can be easy to spend a high proportion of time viewing and processing.

Each of these disadvantages can be managed in some cases negated through the following policy.

Hillington Parish Council Social Media Policy

1. Aims

The aim of this policy is to ensure;

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of council-based services through the use of social media;
- A consistent and corporate approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media.
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines, and relevant legislation;
- That the Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

The Council will make use of these tools to quickly to disseminate information but carefully control their use in order to minimise any risk to the Council.

The policy provides a structured approach to using social media and will ensure that it is effective lawful and does not compromise Council information or computer systems/networks lawful.

That users (regardless of whether they are using a personal or official account) ensure they are using social media sensibly and responsibly and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the Council or its business; not damaging the Council's reputation and credibility, or otherwise violate Council policies.

2. Responsibilities

The Parish Clerk is the designated owner of all social media accounts in Hillington Parish Council's name. As at 2024 no social media accounts in place.

Where a social media account has been set up by another officer, full access will be provided to the Parish Clerk. Ownership will be transferred where and when deemed necessary by the Parish Clerk.

The opening of any new Social Media channel in Hillington Parish Council's name should be approved by the Parish Clerk.

The Parish Clerk will designate a site administrator if required who will be expected to monitor and provide maintenance of any content on the Official Hillington Parish Council social media channels.

Councillors and Staff are at liberty to use their own social media accounts on any platform they choose. These must be identified as personal and make it clear that they do not represent the Council.

Any personal social media account used in relation to the Council is the responsibility of the account holder and must comply with this social media policy.

Councillors and Officers should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary, or defamatory nature must not be made, care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration, and colourful language. Guidelines on Standards of behaviour expected can be found in this policy.

3. Monitoring content and measuring engagement

The Parish Council reserves the right to restrict or remove any content on the Parish Council social media platform that is deemed in violation of the social media policy or applicable law. Users will be informed that their posts may not be published/or may be deleted if they meet any of the criteria below;

- Comments not topical to the article being discussed;
- Comments that are politically motivated;
- Profane language;
- Material that perpetuates discrimination of protected characteristics as listed in the Equality Act 2010, including age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnerships, pregnancy, and maternity;
- Solicitation of commerce *i.e.*; Trying to sell items or encourage the sale of products or services not related to the Council;
- Illegal conduct or encouragement/support of illegal activities;
- Information that compromises or may compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems;
- Content that violates the legal ownership interest of any other party;

Users may include any staff member acting as Hillington Parish Council on social media channels but on some channels, this may also include member of the public who have the opportunity to post on Hillington Parish Council's page.

Posts to Hillington Parish Council official channels that do not observe these standards may be retained or acknowledged when it would be beneficial to transparency. As anything put online will in practice remain online even when deleted, it is often better not to try to hide it, rather deal with it openly and recognise the 'offence'. If and when this may be required is at the discretion of the Parish Clerk.

Impact on the Council's post will be monitored, so far as each platform allows, *e.g.*, to ascertain the number of reposts stimulated to assist in measuring engagement.

4. The law and social media

There are two ways to think about the harmful acts which may be committed using social media, either they are new acts, or they are acts already prohibited by criminal law but not committed in the "new" forum of social media as opposed to elsewhere. It is generally held that the latter is usually the case: Social media is simply a platform for human beings to behave or misbehave it is not about the medium it is about the offence.

Harassment, malicious communications, stalking, threatening violence, incitement, defamation *etc* are all unlawful and have been for a long time.

The Director of Public Prosecutions has published guidelines for the application of current statute law to prosecutions involving social media communications. The guidance is structured by conduct, relating different sorts of conduct to different potential offences, some of the statutes which have a bearing are:

- Data Protection Act 1998
- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Equalities Act 2010
- Defamation Act 2013
- Malicious Communications Act 1988
- Communications Act 2003

5. Guidelines on the use of Social Media

Standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Hillington Parish Council (official and personal accounts)

- Be aware of your responsibilities as defined in this social media policy;
- Remember you are responsible for the content you post on social media;
- Never give out personal details, such as home address and telephone numbers. Contact details should only be given out when they are in the public domain and even then, it is best practice to exchange such contact details outside public social media channels;
- Know your obligations. You must comply with other council policies when using social media;
- Show respect to all. Be respectful of the authority, employees, and other members of the council;
- Be aware that social media networks are rapidly growing in popularity and are used by all ages in society;
- Always remain aware of web security and ensure you use a security and ensure you use a secure password and keep your computer or other hardware secure from viruses;
- Ensure that any mobile device you use to access social media is also secure to avoid others using your device to post under your own name;
- Do not get involved in an argument online, neither party tends to come off well. Limited space and a short time frame in which to phrase a response can inflame a situation. Try to introduce a constructive discourse by asking for useful feedback or assistance to change, or acknowledge the complaint and try to take the discussion offline;
- Online there are individuals who purposefully start and perpetuate an argument. If someone is refusing to act rationally or unwilling to discuss offline be alert to this. If you identify such a situation the best response, having once given the opportunity to discuss rationally is to cease this interaction.

6. Standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Hillington Parish Council

Official channels

- Channels will only be operated during business hours;
- Keep the content relevant to the audience:

Appropriate content may include

- Any Hillington Parish Council project or project in which the Council is working in partnership;
- Sharing projects from partners relating to the above;
- Sharing information in the local public interest;
- Avoid where practical any linking of professional and personal social media accounts within web enabled devices and application. It is appreciated that some platforms such as Facebook will not work correctly without a certain amount of linkage between personal profile and business pages, however, care should always be taken to ensure you are responding as the correct entity at all times.

Personal accounts

- Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Council. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only.

Approved January 2021
Reviewed August 2023
Reviewed August 2024