



COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

July 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

This strategy will focus the communication efforts of the North Thoresby, Grainsby and Waithe Parish Council (NTGW) and support it to be effective and efficient in its activity to serve NTGW parishes and our wider community.

1.1 Strategy context

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity ('the Code'). The Code is statutory guidance and the Parish Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

It also takes account of national guidance, for example 'The Good Councillor's Guide 2018 (National Association of Local Councils – 'The Guide').

1.2 The need for a communications strategy

NTGW Parish Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders. Better communications lead to recognition and respect – reputation matters. 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.

Achieving the Council's aims and objectives requires good communication with every individual, group and organisation we work with, or provide services for. Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to make sure messages communicated by the Parish Council are consistent and accurate. But if communication is managed effectively, the Parish Council can create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

1.3 What should we be communicating?

Research by MORI, an independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, states 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
- Clean, green and safe environment
- Positive experiences of contact with council employees and contractors

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 our communications strategy. There is also a need for proactive and reactive information:

- Proactively – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
 - Reactively – giving residents information they want to know
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2. COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

- To ensure the Parish Council is aware of and responds in a timely manner to what the people of the community want and need to know.
 - To use a variety of digital and traditional communication channels to make sure the information we provide is accessible for the whole community - irrespective of IT capability.
 - To ensure our messages are relevant, clear and factual to ensure maximum impact and interaction between the Parish Council and our communities.
 - To provide a user friendly website to drive interaction with our audiences - both to fit within the legal obligations of accessibility as well as being user friendly.
 - To provide enough detail in the website to provide assurance of governance to the community and stakeholders but not to drown the website page in unnecessary pieces of information.
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3. COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

Five principles underpin the strategy. Our communication channels need to:

- Be accessible for all
- Be convenient to access
- Help manage expectations
- Be relevant, clear and factual
- Encourage two-way positive engagement and to 'act together'.

3.1 Identifying newsworthy items

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Parish Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Parish Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk to make the decision as to whether or not a publication or release should be issued. The content of a publication or release should be written by the Parish Clerk in consultation with the Chair, and Committee Chairs.

3.2 Handling media enquiries

The Parish Clerk co-ordinates all formal media enquiries to the Parish Council. Members and Parish Council staff who are directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without establishing the full facts. If Members are in any doubt they should consult the Parish Clerk.

The Parish Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. The phrase “no comment” should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Parish Council is open and accountable and should always try to explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry. Any requests for a comment or clarification should be referred to the Clerk for review.

3.2.1 Managing negative issues

From time to time the Parish Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity. Members and Officers must alert the Parish Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest is known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media. Councillors and the Clerk must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Parish Council about an issue.

3.2.2 Correcting inaccurate reporting

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Parish Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be managed the Parish Clerk in consultation with the Chair to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the publisher, editor or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who is the most appropriate person to take the agreed action.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain; each case should be judged individually.

Occasionally the Parish Council will get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising and stating how the Parish Council will learn from the error or put it right.

3.3 Statement releases

The use of statement releases is a key technique for publicising Parish Council activities, decisions and achievements. An official Parish Council release is made on behalf of the Parish Council as a whole; it will be written and issued by the Parish Clerk. Official Parish Council releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Parish Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Parish Councillor.

Parish Council statement releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Parish Councillors, identify a Councillor's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view. All official Parish Council releases will be placed on the Parish Council's website within three working days of issue.

3.4 Interviews

Any member of staff or elected Member who is contacted by a journalist requesting an interview in their capacity as a representative of the Parish Council should refer the matter to the Parish Clerk.

The situation and the information required by the journalist will inform the choice of person put forward for interview. Officers should never give their opinion on specific Parish Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages, their role being to provide expertise and factual knowledge only in support of the Parish Council's approved and agreed policies.

3.5 Media coverage of council meetings

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Parish Council and Committee meetings. During meetings Members and Officers should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what may be a complex issue.

Where a meeting of the Parish Council and its committees includes an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Parish Council's Standing Orders. Both the media and the public are entitled to film and record council meetings held in public.

4. INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

4.1 Freedom of Information and data protection

Should the Parish Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt. The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure. In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data.

The Data Protection Act 2018 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Councillors and Parish Council Staff should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

The Parish Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The Parish Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Parish Council's standing orders, under contract or by common law. Parish Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the code of conduct adopted by the Parish Council, a copy of which is available via the Parish Council's website.

Individual Councillor's actions on communication

The purpose of this strategy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Councillors and Parish Council staff involved in dealing with the community or media and to provide guidance on how to handle requests for information. It is also to ensure that the Parish Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner.

This policy does not seek to regulate Parish Councillors in their private capacity but does provide advice and guidance on their sensible use of conventional and social media. But the strategy is designed to ensure that the Parish Council speaks with one voice and that most communication into the Parish Council is done through one channel and person - in the majority of times this would be the Parish Clerk.

The Parish Council's communications with the community or media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Parish Council.

If the views of Parish Councillors are different to the Parish Council's corporate position and views, it is the responsibility of every councillor to make this distinction clear that they are speaking as a private person, not a member of the Parish Council. Caution is the better side of valour.

Subject to the obligations on Parish Councillors not to disclose information referred to in section 4.1 and not to misrepresent the Parish Council's position, while this strategy is not designed to gag Parish Councillors as the right to free speech is fundamental to democracy, Parish Councillors must appreciate if communicate their position and views what the impact that would have on the Parish Council and the community interaction.

In all cases, the Parish Council's approach, in accordance with the Code and the Guide, is that all individual councillor communications should:

- be lawful
- be cost effective
- be objective
- be even-handed
- be appropriate
- have regard to the Parish Council's policies, particularly Equality and Diversity
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity (eg elections).

If in doubt, never say anything you will be uncomfortable repeating in court.

5. COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The type of communication channels used will depend on the target audience and the message to be communicated. These will include:

- Parish Council website
- Social media (either directly or indirectly)
- Consultations and feedback forms
- Correspondence (general)
- Direct responses (email, phone, in person representations)
- Parish Council meetings
- Parish Council committees
- Nominated Parish Council spokesperson (e.g. for social media responses)
- Annual Parish meeting
- Parish Councillors interaction with the individual members of the community
- Features submitted to local newsletters
- Posters, flyers, newsletters
- Village notice boards
- Networking links with partners/stakeholders.

5.1 Website

The Parish Council website is an important vehicle for the promotion of Parish Council and wider Parish activities. The website will not:

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or be used for campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner.

5.2 Social media

Social media can be used by the Parish Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

The aim of this part of the strategy is to make sure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Parish Council-based services through the use of social media
 - A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media
 - That Parish Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media
 - That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation
 - That the Parish Council is not brought into disrepute.
 - Social media activity isn't something that stands alone. To be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be included in social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.
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6. PARISH COUNCIL PUBLICATION OF AGENDAS AND MINUTES

6.1. Agendas of Parish Council Meetings

The rules governing the specific requirements of the publication of the agendas of Parish Council Meetings (either Full PC Meetings, Committees or Extraordinary Meetings) is clearly detailed in the Local Government Act 1972, Part II (10) (2).

In order for any decisions made by Councillors at the said meetings to be legally valid, the Agenda must be posted in a public place three clear days prior of the meeting date. The three days not include the day of the posting in a public place and the day of the meeting. The usual place of 'public place' is the Parish Noticeboard and the Parish Council Website.

The Parish Council in order to ensure that any decision made at the meeting is valid, must follow this requirement. If the requirement for notice is not followed, any decisions made at the meeting may be considered ultra virus and not valid. In addition the decisions or actions made could be challenged in Court and the decisions made overturned.

It is imperative that the agendas for meetings are properly published.

6.2. DRAFT Minutes of Parish Council Meetings

While there are no legal obligations as detailed in the LGA 1972 to publish the DRAFT minutes of any Parish Council meetings to the general community, it is best practice (as advised by National Association of Local Councils), to ensure that the general public have access to the DRAFT minutes before the next meeting of the Parish Council. This allows the community, specifically the members of the community who did not attend the meeting, to be aware the discussions and decisions of the Parish Council. The main element that should be made clear however is that until the minutes are agreed by the Parish Council are an

accurate record of the meeting, then the minutes cannot be accepted as a legal record of what happened - the usual process is that the minutes are agreed by the Parish Council at the next meeting of the Council.

There are two ways that are usual for the Parish Council to publish the DRAFT minutes for the aid of the community; to present them on the Parish Council noticeboard and to publish them on the Parish Council website. Whilst the most convenient access for the community to the DRAFT minutes is to read them on the website, the Parish Council should accept that there are members of the community who are not as computer literate as modern society expects and to ensure that the Council meets the needs of any the community, they need to consider all access options - that are accessible but also convenient.

The main issue with publishing on the noticeboard is that often the DRAFT minutes can be quite lengthy and the plastic shielding on the noticeboard is not overtly clear.

The approach for publishing the DRAFT minutes could be as follows:

- Ensure the DRAFT minutes are published on the Parish Council website within 10 working days
- Allow a paper copy of the DRAFT minutes to be available in the Village Hall on specific days and times. To ensure that the route of the availability of the minutes are accessible and are made clear on the Parish noticeboard.

7. PUBLICITY AND COMMUNICATION DURING ELECTIONS

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself ('purdah') all proactive publicity about candidates and other politicians is halted. This applies to scheduled local, national or European elections, plus referendums.

During this period Parish Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Parish Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required the relevant Officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this policy.

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature – this includes web advertising. There are additional requirements, such as imprint standards, for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

Accounts may need to be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities. Political blogs cannot be linked from the Parish Council's website and the Parish Council will not promote any Parish Councillors' social media accounts during the election purdah period. Parish Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Parish Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Any queries regarding publicity during a purdah period should always be referred to the Parish Clerk for further advice.

8. PROMOTION OF THIS STRATEGY

In order for this strategy to be effective, it should be promoted across the community to both give assurance to the community of the style and format of communication they can expect, but also to give a framework for the Parish Council to manage any communication needs. It will also crucially provide a framework for the Parish Council to consider how future policies or Council projects or initiatives are communicated the community.

It would be prudent to ensure that this strategy is both promoted through a digital means on the website and in the Village Hall, and possibly on the noticeboard. This will ensure that as many of the community can see how the Parish Council will communicate with them and the structure of said communications.

8. REVIEW

The whole Council will oversee the development and implementation of the strategy and review it as and when, but at least on an annual basis.