COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

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BEMBRIDGE PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA POLICY

1. Introduction

1.1 The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables the Parish Council to interact in a way that improves the communications, both within the Council, and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves.

1.2 The Council has a website and Facebook page and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

1.3 The Council Facebook page intends to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and promote our community positively.

2. The Legal Framework

2.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

2.2 The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

3. PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

3.1 The point of contact for the parish council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the parish council should be addressed.

3.2 The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.

3.3 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. In particular, Councillors and Officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.

3.4 Most official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letter headed paper. For correspondence not sent by the Clerk, he must be provided with a copy.

4. Agenda Items

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

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

4.3 Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

5. Communications with the Press and Public

5.1 The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chair of the council or the Chair of the relevant committee.

5.2 Press reports from the council, its committees or working parties should be from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.

5.3 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 clearly reported as their personal view.

5.4 Unless a Councillor is reporting the view of the council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.

5.5 If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure.

6. Councillor Correspondence to External Parties

6.1 As the Clerk should be sending most of the council's correspondence from a Councillor 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.

6.2 A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

7. Communications with Parish Council Staff

7.1 Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or subcommittee with appropriate delegated powers from the council).

7.2 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 which are inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.

7.3 Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the parish council.

7.4 Emails:

• Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated;

• Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk;

• E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk;

• Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

7.5 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 clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

8. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

8.1 The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

8.2 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who responsible and appropriate action was taken.

8.3 When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from the Council's solicitor before any response is made. Whenever possible any information given to the press shall be given in writing so as not to leave interpretation open to misunderstanding and misreporting.

8.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Member contact details are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.

8.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or the Chair are authorised to make contact with the media.

8.6 Statements made by the Chair and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion.

8.7 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council.

8.8 There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other

correspondents. Such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.

9. Attendances of Media at Council Meetings

9.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.

9.2 The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

9.3 Any filming or taping of Council proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Clerk and Chair of the meeting (see Standing Orders).

10. Press Releases

10.1 The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of the Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

10.2 The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section two (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

11. SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

11.1 Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria.

It will:

- be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere which we do not have permission to share;
- not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
- be moderated by the Clerk to the Council or either the Chair/Vice Chair of the Council;
- not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

11.2 For all communications, in order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, the following guidelines should be observed:

• be considerate and respectful of others – vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated;

• differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Councillors or staff, will not be permitted;

• share freely and be generous with official Council posts, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due;

• stay on topic;

• refrain from using the Council's Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

11.3 Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and the Council's staff will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels

12. Facebook

Aims

12.1 This policy relates to the creation and management of a Facebook Page by the Parish Council.

12.2 The aim of this policy is to set down rules and regulations to ensure proper use of the page.

12.3 The aim is to use the Facebook page to interact in a stronger way with the Parish's people, advertising events and other projects of the Parish Council.

Management

12.4 The page will be created and managed solely by the Parish Council Clerk. No Councillors will have access to the page for administration purposes

12.5 The page would be set up using the Parish Clerk's email address.

12.6 Only information regarding the Parish Council should be entered as part of the Biography.

12.7 The account should only link to pages of a local government organisation or organisations/causes relating to the Parish.

12.8 No religious or political views should be expressed under the biography.

12.9 Friends will not be allowed to post new topics to the wall – This will prevent others placing topics on games etc. to the Parish Council's account for all to see. However, friends would be able to comment on wall topics created by the Parish Council.

12.10 Posts on the page would be available for all uses of Facebook to see.

12.11 Photo Albums will be open for everyone to view.

12.12 Photo's uploaded to the album will not have direct view of any child's face without the prior consent of their guardian.

12.13 The page will be maintained by the Parish Clerk who will remove messages from the wall which include:

a. Abusive language content

b. Which may cause offence to a specific group of people eg comments on a person's sexuality, sexist comments, racial comments etc.

c. Which contain potentially libellous comments

12.14 If any points raised on the wall are relevant and need to be discussed by the Council then if necessary further information will be sought before bringing it to the Council.

12.15 Event dates will be created for any Parish Council event taking place.

12.16 People would be encouraged to be friends of the Parish Council

12.17 If friends are repeatedly abusing the Parish Council's wall then they will be removed from the friends list and unable to post to the wall. Instances which would involve removal from the friends list include repeated:

a. Posting with abusive language content

b. Posting comments which may cause offence to a specific group of people eg comments of a person's sexuality, sexist comments, racial comments etc

c. Posting potential libellous comments

12.18 Private messages will only be sent in response to anyone sending an initial private message to the Parish Council account. The response will ask the person to email the Council with the request for comment and the office email will be provided.

13. Parish Council Website

13.1 Where necessary, the Council may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive, particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

13.2 The following items may be included on the website:

- meeting dates;
- meeting agenda and minutes;
- financial information as required under the Transparency Code and the Practitioners' Guide;

- policies and procedures;
- member information;
- information on village clubs societies and organisations and events;
- news articles.

13.3 The following items will NOT be included:

- articles affiliated to, or promoting any political organisation;
- commercial advertisements;
- publicity for any non-charitable fund raising event.

14. Parish Council Email

14.1 The Clerk to the Council has their own Council email address [clerk@bembridgeparishcouncil.gov.uk].

14.2 The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, [Monday to Friday], and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can.

14.3 An 'out of office' message will be used when appropriate.

14.4 The Clerk is responsible for dealing with all email received and passing on any relevant mail to Councillors or external agencies for information and/or action.

14.5 Individual Councillors are also provided with council-owned email addresses and are at liberty to communicate directly with residents in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. Please note that any emails sent to Councillors or the Clerk become official and will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act. These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept. Councillors and staff are reminded that personal information should not be forwarded on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

15. Text Messages and WhatsApp

15.1 The Clerk is provided with a Council-owned mobile telephone.

15.2 Councillors and the Clerk may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times.

15.3 All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

15.4 Use of the WhatsApp group should be limited to:

- reminders (but not as the primary means of notification) of practical aspects of meetings, for example dates and times;

• a tool for rapid communication for sharing information in the event of an emerging situation facing the parish, for example, flooding.

Texts and the WhatsApp group should not be used for:

• day-to-day discussion of, and views on, Council policies and their implementation;

• as evidence of agreement / disagreement;

• an alternative to voting

• an agreement of a specific course of action or financial commitment by the Council;

• providing feedback to other Councillors;

• proposing agenda items, sharing papers, notification in advance of apologies.

16. Video Conferencing

16.1 If this medium is used to communicate, please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

16.2 England The Council is not able to hold formal meetings via video conferencing, although hybrid meetings to enable the public to attend via video are permissible. Councillors, must, however, be in attendance in the meeting room.

17. Councillor Responsibilities

17.1 Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council.

17.2 Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

17.3 Councillors should also be careful only to 'cc' essential recipients on emails for instance to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

17.4 Councillors who post on social media must observe the Code of Conduct.

17.5 Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share.

17.6 Being a Councillor does not prevent a member of the public from pursuing legal action following the publication of an untrue statement and Councillors may be held personally liable.

17.7 Any Councillor posting, referring to themselves as a Councillor – even if it is in a personal capacity – may be considered as acting in an official capacity.

17.8 When posting to social media, it should be remembered that:

- the Councillor is an elected representative of the Council;
- any post can affect the reputation of the Council;
- it is the Council which is the corporate decision-making body – no Councillor can independently make decisions for the Council over social media;
- some issues and communications are best left to the Council's official social media accounts;
- having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations;
- the Council cannot be involved in party political issues;
- it is not necessary to respond or make comment on everything on social media – in fact sometimes it is better not to;
- posts must not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.