

TOSTOCK PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA POLICY

Adopted 2025-03-11

1 Introduction

The Council is committed to the provision of timely, accurate information to all, in respect of its functions, decisions and actions. This policy will focus the communication efforts of the Council and support it to be effective and efficient in its activity to serve both residents and wider audiences.

2 Policy Context

2.1 This policy is advised by the *Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity*, issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government, being statutory guidance applying to all local authorities. The Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions. It requires that publicity must:

- ◆ be lawful;
- ◆ be cost effective;
- ◆ be objective;
- ◆ be even-handed;
- ◆ be appropriate;
- ◆ have regard to equality and diversity; and
- ◆ be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

2.2 The Code also takes account of national guidance, for example *The Good Councillor's Guide 2024* published by the National Association of Local Councils.

3 The Need for a Communications Strategy

The Council has a duty to engage purposefully and in a timely manner with its residents, partners, employees, and stakeholders. Better communications lead to recognition and respect - reputation matters. The Council needs to communicate effectively what it is doing. Achieving its aims and objectives requires good communication with every individual, group, and organisation with whom the Council engages and works with, or to whom it provides services. As such, messages and information must be properly co-ordinated such that they are consistent and accurate.

4 What Should the Council be Communicating?

4.1 Research carried out for the Local Government Association identified the most important drivers of council reputation among local residents as:

- ◆ perceived quality of services overall;
- ◆ perceived value for money;
- ◆ media coverage;
- ◆ direct communications;
- ◆ Council performance;
- ◆ clean, green, and safe environment; and

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- ◆ positive experiences of contact with council employees and contractors.

4.2 For the Council to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its communications strategy.

4.3 There is also a need for proactive and reactive information:

- ◆ proactively - giving people information to influence and change attitudes; and
- ◆ reactively - giving residents information they want to know.

5 Communication Objectives

- ◆ To ensure the Council is aware of and responds in a timely manner to what residents want and need to know.
- ◆ To use a variety of digital and traditional communication channels to make sure information provided is accessible for the whole community.
- ◆ To ensure messages are relevant, clear and factual to ensure maximum impact and interaction between the Council and the community.
- ◆ To provide a user-friendly and accessible website to drive interaction with audiences.
- ◆ To celebrate success of interest to the village.

6 Communication Principles

Communication channels need to:

- ◆ be accessible to all;
- ◆ be convenient to access;
- ◆ help manage expectations;
- ◆ be relevant, clear, and factual; and
- ◆ encourage two-way positive engagement.

7 Identifying Newsworthy Items

It is the responsibility of both councillors and staff to identify any newsworthy items which might warrant a press release, such as Council initiatives and vital decisions. The content of a release will be approved by the Chair of the Council prior to being issued by the Clerk.

8 Handling Media Enquiries

The Clerk co-ordinates all formal media enquiries to the Council. Councillors who may be directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without establishing the full facts. The Council will not pass comments

on anonymous allegations, leaks or allegations about individual staff or councillors. The Chair will normally deal with the media on behalf of the Council.

9 Managing Negative Issues

Exceptionally the Council will need to respond to negative issues. Such situations will be managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity. Councillors should alert the Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest, is known. Any response will be drafted and managed by the Chair with the help and advice of the Clerk.

10 Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The Chair and Clerk will decide what action, if any, is appropriate.

11 Press Releases

Press releases can be key to publicising Council activities, decisions, and achievements. Official releases will be written and issued by the Clerk following liaison with any councillor or councillors involved and the Chair. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts, and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate councillor. Council press releases will not promote the views of any political groups, publicise the activities of individual councillors, or seek to persuade the public to hold a particular view. All releases will be placed on the Council website within one working day of issue.

12 Interviews

Any councillor who is contacted by a journalist requesting an interview in his/her capacity as a representative of the Council should refer the matter to the Clerk. The situation and the information required by the journalist will inform the choice of person put forward for interview. The Clerk will never offer an opinion on specific Council policy but keep to the corporate line, the role being to provide expertise and factual knowledge only in support of approved Council policies.

13 Media Coverage of Council Meetings

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Council meetings. During meetings councillors and the Clerk should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives any journalist attending an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalistic interpretation of what may

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be a complex issue. Where a meeting of the Council includes an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by Council standing orders. Both the media and the public are entitled to film and record council meetings held in public.

14 Audiences and Information Requirements

The Parish Council is clear on the range of audiences it needs to communicate with, the reasons for doing so and their information requirements. These include:

- ◆ Tostock residents (individuals and any target groups, e.g. young people);
- ◆ local community groups and clubs;
- ◆ businesses and employers in and around the village;
- ◆ local government (county, district and other local parish councils);
- ◆ existing and potential suppliers and service providers;
- ◆ local schools;
- ◆ councillors, employees and volunteers;
- ◆ media; and
- ◆ local charities.

15 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 (e-mail or written), then that correspondence will normally be disclosed unless it is exempt. The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not prevent disclosure. In addition, appropriate care will be taken when processing personal data. Personal information may not be used other than for the purpose(s) for which it was supplied. Councillors will, necessarily, be mindful of this when using any personal data provided to them. The Council cannot disclose confidential information, nor information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. Likewise, the Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, Council standing orders, under contract or by common law. Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the code of conduct adopted by the Council.

16 Individual Councillors

- 16.1 A key purpose of this policy is to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. It does not seek to regulate councillors in their private capacity. Council communications represent the corporate position and views of the Council. Should views of individual councillors be different then it is the responsibility of each and every councillor to make this distinction clear. Subject to the obligations on councillors not to disclose information referred to in

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section 15 (above) and not to misrepresent the Council position on any matter, councillors are free to communicate their position and views.

- 16.2 In all cases, the Council approach, in accordance with prevailing codes and guidance is that all individual councillor communications should:
- ◆ be lawful;
 - ◆ be cost effective;
 - ◆ be objective;
 - ◆ be even-handed;
 - ◆ be appropriate;
 - ◆ have regard to Council policies; and
 - ◆ be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity (e.g. elections).

17 Communication Channels

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

- ◆ Council website;
- ◆ social media;
- ◆ consultations and feedback forms;
- ◆ correspondence (general);
- ◆ direct responses (e-mail, telephone, in person representations);
- ◆ Council meetings;
- ◆ Council working groups;
- ◆ village working groups/forums/events/surgeries;
- ◆ Annual Parish meeting;
- ◆ councillors;
- ◆ Council publications ("Tostock Chronicle"); and
- ◆ Council and village noticeboards.

18 Website

The Council website is an important vehicle for the positive promotion of Council and wider village 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; or
- ◆ be used in an abusive, hateful, or disrespectful manner.

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19 Social Media

- 19.1 Social media can and may be used by the Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity. Any such engagement with individuals and communities and the successful promotion of Council services through the use of social media will:
- ◆ provide for the adoption and maintenance of a consistent approach;
 - ◆ ensure Council information remains secure and is not compromised;
 - ◆ be facilitated within existing policies, guidelines, and relevant legislation; and
 - ◆ ensure that the Council is not brought into disrepute.
- 19.2 Social media activity is not something that stands alone. To be effective it will be integrated as part of the general communications mix with planned campaigns, promotions and activities potentially included in social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.
- 19.3 Councillors and staff must avoid making or being involved in any social media communications which could damage either Council business or the reputation of the Council, even indirectly.
- 19.4 Councillors and staff must not use social media to:
- ◆ defame or disparage the Council or its staff or any third party;
 - ◆ harass or unlawfully discriminate against councillors or third parties;
 - ◆ make false or misleading statements; or
 - ◆ to impersonate councillors or third parties.
- 19.5 Councillors and staff must not express opinions on behalf of the Council via social media, unless expressly authorised to do so by the Chair or Clerk.

20 Publicity During Elections

- 20.1 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.
- 20.2 During this period Council publicity will not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual councillors, groups of councillors or political parties or organisations. This is to ensure that no individual councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities.