Lympstone Parish Council Communications Policy

The following policy was reviewed and agreed by Lympstone Parish Council on **3rd February 2025.**

1. Introduction and Scope

The purpose of this policy is to define the communications roles and responsibilities within the Parish Council and provide guidelines for its use.
Lympstone Parish Council (LPC) articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.
The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what LPC does, whilst also enabling LPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.
It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications between council members and third parties.
The principles of these guidelines apply to Parish Councillors and the Clerk to LPC. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable LPC to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities.
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust, and confidence by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the parish, the district and region.
- be an effective voice of the community.
- maintain and enhance the reputation of LPC.
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of LPC or the parish.

3. Who is Communicating

3.1 Proper Officer

The Proper Officer (the Clerk) has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies. 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.
The Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.
All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk or an authorised Committee Chair, in the name of the council, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the parish council.
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.

Council letterheaded paper must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the parish council and must not be used to convey personal views. Council letterheaded paper is used by the Clerk in the day to day running of the Parish Council and its interests.

3.2 Councillors

Elected and co-opted members will be regularly approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. How enquiries from the public are dealt with by Councillors will reflect on LPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk shall be sought.

At no time should councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to LPC. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate.
- request an item on a relevant agenda.
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of LPC, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject. LPC will agree its statements for release to the press and social media.

All councillors are provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

Council letterheaded paper may be used by the Clerk when preparing communications from any councillor if requested but must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the parish council and must not be used to convey personal views.

Emails received by the Council's Proper Officer, or Members may be disclosed following a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or following a subject access request under the Data Protection Act 1998, under the General Data Protection Regulation or in the course of legal proceedings.

Guidance on interaction:

- LPC Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the parish council.
- All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman or the Parish Clerk.
- If appropriate, for a specific issue the Chairman may authorise another councillor to make a statement on behalf of LPC.
- All media comment must accurately reflect LPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of LPC made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media.
- The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able speak with some authority, using plain English.
- Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of LPC or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the council or members of the community.

- Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from LPC's Solicitor before any response is made.
- Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement' to the media must clearly inform the media:
    - o that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of LPC:
    - o that other councillors may hold a different view.
    - o that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by LPC.

4. General Principles

When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed. Keep the communications relevant and concise. Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary.

Always write emails as if they are permanent because even when they have been deleted, they can often still be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court or the Information Commissioner. Internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.

Information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive information that needs to be respected.

Always respect the privacy of others. Where members receive correspondence from residents which needs to be forwarded for another party to act upon, any information which identifies the originator of the correspondence should not be shared unless doing so would make it impossible for the recipient to respond.

Do not write anything in communications that might be construed as offensive or discriminatory.

Do not make negative comments about an individual, including members of the public, Members, Officer, or business suppliers.

Use a Parish Council signature so that it is clear in what capacity you are writing. Copy in (either cc or bcc) any appropriate officer or councillor.

5. Responsibilities and Accountabilities

Officers and Councillors alike are responsible for ensuring compliance with this and related policies.

6. Procedure

6.1 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 the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- Communications between councillors regarding agenda items should have regard to the potential issue of pre-determination. While it is perfectly acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and information, councillors should ensure they retain an open mind and avoid comments that might give the perception of having reached a conclusion.
- 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 will be circulated via the Clerk.

- Correspondence from the Clerk marked “Confidential” must be treated as such and not be disclosed to anyone.

6.2 Correspondence with external parties

- All correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed to the Clerk. Councillors should forward any correspondence received to the Clerk.
- No individual Parish Councillor should communicate directly with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship unless as directed by the Council Chair. Otherwise, all enquiries should be through the Clerk.
- If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a councillor, the matter should be referred to the Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain.

7. Communications with Parish Council Staff

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 sub- committee with appropriate delegated powers from the council).

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.

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

E-mails: 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 in a timely manner when requested to do so. Emails requesting action or response should be replied to within three working days.

Meetings with the Clerk or other officers: Wherever possible an appointment should be made; meetings should be relevant to the work of the officer; councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not driven by a personal agenda.

8. Contact with the Media

The Clerk is the first point of contact for the media. Approaches from the media should be referred to the Parish Clerk. Individual councillors are not permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council.

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. The Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman, is responsible for issuing formal press releases on behalf of the Council.

Proactive media releases may be issued to promote a decision or work of the Parish Council.

Reactive press releases may be prepared and issued in response to a specific question or as a rebuttal to an article already published. Such statements should be dealt with in a timely manner.

Unless a Parish Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, parish councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that any views they express are personal and not necessarily those of the Council.

Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.
Letters or articles representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Parish Clerk unless they have been specifically approved by Council. If Members choose to express their own opinions on Council matters, they must make clear that the views put forward are those of the individual Member and not representative of Council policy.
Members and the Clerk should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

9. Other Methods of Communication

9.1 Online Presence

Online content should be objective, balanced, informative, and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.
LPC's website is to be regularly updated and kept up to date.
All communications should promote the council website and if appropriate its social media accounts.

9.2 Noticeboards

The village noticeboards will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information.
Locked noticeboards are intended generally for Parish Council specific information although consideration will be given to using the space for notices pertaining to activities of interest or other important information.

9.3 Publications

The Lympstone Herald and other publications can be used by the Parish Council to publicise parish council issues and highlight other organisations, information and activities within Lympstone.

9.4 Parish Council Logo

The Parish Council's logo is used as a brand to identify LPC and the parish as a whole. The logo is owned by LPC and can only be used with the Parish Council's express permission.

10. Related Policies and Procedures

These include but are not limited to:
LPC Code of Conduct
LPC Social and digital media policy

11. Review

The Policy will be reviewed annually.

Lucy Tyrrell, Clerk and RFO to Lympstone Parish Council

Date of next review: ***February 2026***