

# **YAXHAM PARISH COUNCIL**

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

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## **1. Introduction**

Yaxham Parish Council undertakes to communicate, consult and engage. The purpose of this policy is therefore to set out how the Council intends to achieve this and develop and improve its communications in the future.

Current communications include the Parish Council's (including the Parish Charity and NP4Yaxham Working Group) websites, contributions to local publications, media, newsletters and consultation, social media (NP4Yaxham) and Annual Report.

The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what we do, while also enabling the Council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

## **2. Communication**

### **2.1 Why is communication important?**

Local government communications have, over the past few years, increasingly focused on reputation. Improved communications lead to recognition and respect – reputation **does** matter. 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.

The Parish Council, through good communication, will understand and better meet the needs of the community, whilst also raising the profile of the village and the Parish Council.

Good communications will enable the Council to:

- Better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- Raise the profile of Yaxham as a destination
- Attract businesses/employment to the village
- Make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people
- Proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the image or integrity of the Council and the Parish

### **2.2 What should we be communicating?**

There are two methods of communicating:

- Active – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
- Reactive – giving residents information they have requested

Research by MORI, and independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, suggests that the most important drivers of Council reputation among local residents are:

- Perceived value for money
- Media coverage
- Direct communications
- Council performance
- A clean, green and safe environment
- Positive experiences of contact with Councillors & Staff

If the Council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve resident satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its communications.

### **2.3 Who should we be communicating with?**

The Council's audiences are wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents
- Parish Council Clerk/RFO
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people
- The media
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- Yaxham's elected representatives: District Cllrs, County Cllrs and MPs
- Other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the area

## **2.4 How should we be communicating?**

The Council will ensure that information is easily accessible, relevant and timely and recognises the importance of communication and commits to meet the expectations of the community it serves. Different forms of communication will appeal to different ages, social groups and demographics so it is important to ensure that within reason, all options for increasing communication and participation are considered in order to communicate effectively with everyone.

The advances made in information technology offer exciting new ways of communicating. At the same time, for many people, traditional methods – newspapers, telephone and newsletters – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

Currently communication is achieved through:

- Press releases
- The Council's website
- Council agenda papers/correspondence
- Contribution to Community News
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific newsletters and consultation

Ways in which communication could be improved:

- Improved visibility of the Council and its activities by more frequent reporting
- Inviting residents to be actively involved in Council meetings during the time set aside for public discussion
- Improved communication by means of attending meetings of Community Organisations and Safer Neighbourhood
- Improve relations by Councillors taking up places on community groups and organisations
- Continue to improve the Council's website to make it more user friendly including capturing data for a communication database
- Consider the use of social media
- Better promotion of the Council's online presence
- Invite groups using Council premises to contribute to the Council Newsletter
- Active involvement in various networking organisations (e.g. SLCC, Norfolk ALC, Safer Neighbourhood Action Panel)
- Regular consultation with the community and feedback to them on subsequent analysis including actions resulting from the consultation i.e. "You said this and We did that"

### **2.4.1 Press – manage the media more effectively**

The media play a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital. All communication to the media by Councillors in their Parish Council role must be sent to the Parish Clerk or the Chairman of the Council (or in their absence, the Vice Chairman) for approval.

Standing Order 21. Relations with the press/media states:

*“Requests from the press or other media for an oral or written comment or statement from the Council, its councillors or staff shall be handled in accordance with the Council’s policy in respect of dealing with the press and/or other media.”*

The Communities and Local Government report found people were most positive about their Council in areas where the Council had a good relationship with the local media. Whilst good relationships already exist, there is always room for improvement.

Key points for effective management of media relations:

- Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time
- Be helpful, polite and positive
- Never say “no comment”. Never speculate or gossip
- Ensure a full understanding of the question before answering. In the event of any indecision refer to the Parish Clerk or the Chairman (or in their absence, the Vice Chairman)
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Parish Clerk or the Chairman (or in their absence, the Vice Chairman)
- Evaluate media coverage
- Issue timely and relevant press releases
- Pre-empt potential stories arising from Council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR (where possible)
- Ensure all media contact is with the Parish Clerk or Chairman (or in their absence, the Vice Chairman) as per Standing Orders.
- Issues **not** to be discussed are 1) legal issues, 2) personnel issues, 3) questions involving Council integrity or 4) emergency situations

#### **2.4.2 Online presence – improve the Parish Council’s website**

The Parish Council’s website is to be regularly updated and is as much as possible kept up-to-date and to include:

- Clerk/RFO contact details;
- Councillor contact details to be included, such as their residential address from the publicly available Declaration of Interests, and with their agreement phone number(s), email etc;
- Meeting Dates, Agendas and Minutes (Council, Committees & the Annual Parish Meeting);
- Parish Council Policies, Finances;
- Planning Applications;
- Elected Representatives contact details;
- Parish News

It is important to work out strategies for keeping the website up-to-date and for ensuring good links with local businesses and community groups.

#### **2.4.3 To investigate the effective use of social media**

To investigate the use of social media, including Facebook and Twitter in order to promote the activities of the Council. If it is agreed that these are accepted methods of promotion of the Council’s activities then a social media policy will be needed together with an agreement as to by whom and when messages will be posted.

#### **2.4.4 Better promotion of the council’s online presence**

All communications – headed paper, email templates, newsletters and consultations etc. should promote the Council’s website and, if appropriate, its social media accounts. It is important to ensure that links to our website are provided from other key partners, especially Breckland Council, Norfolk County Council and our local Member of Parliament.

#### **2.4.5 Public Consultation – carrying out effective consultation**

Yaxham is lucky to have two bodies of in-depth consultation to draw on – the Community Led Plan 2013 and the Neighbourhood Plan 2017. The Neighbourhood Plan is due for review for 2022. The Council's current consultations is by way of occasional questionnaires on specific subjects and members interaction with the public.

Based on this body of consultation the Council may consider creating an action plan. Such a Plan could include Council priorities can then be developed, which will be reviewed perhaps annually. This could help to ensure that the Council is engaged, and truly representing the needs of the community to other authorities/partners. The information obtained will also help to provide useful evidence in support of initiatives and funding bids. In addition, the Council may consider consultations to gather public opinion on perception and satisfaction of the Council and the work it does. The results of such consultation could also help to better understand the Council's strengths and weaknesses and could help the Council to measure the effectiveness of its work in.

Any consultations need to be developed in such a way that there is an opportunity for all members of the community to engage in the process.

#### **2.5 Who (from the Council) should be communicating?**

The Standing Orders at "26 Communications" state:

*"a. All communication, written and verbal, between the Council and others must be affected through the Clerk. All correspondence issued on behalf of the Council must be prepared and signed by the Clerk with copies being sent to the Chairman and other Councillors as appropriate. Incoming correspondence should be addressed to and opened by the Clerk. Copies of incoming mail will be sent to the Chairman and other Councillors for action as appropriate. Any correspondence received by Councillors must be forwarded to the Clerk without any action being taken.*

*b. For the purposes of these standing orders "correspondence" includes letters, faxes, e-mails and any other non-verbal means.*

It is imperative that:

- All communication from the Council is courteous, timely, professional, appropriate and reflects the decisions and policies of the Council
- All individuals communicating on behalf of the Council are aware that every piece of communication reflects on the reputation of the Council in the community

Staff and Councillors are ambassadors of the Council and must remember this in all communications.

##### **2.5.1 Parish Clerk**

The Parish Clerk has overall responsibility for overseeing all communications with members of the community and outside bodies. The Parish Clerk will be provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business. The clerk is to include a 'signature' as part of all email communication so that their name, position contact information, and the website (and social media, if appropriate) links for the Council and its organisations.

##### **2.5.2 Councillors**

Elected members will be regularly approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. How contact from the public are dealt with by Councillors will reflect on the Council.

At no time should Councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to promise to investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to the Parish Council. Depending on the issue raised 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 consulted the Parish Clerk

All communication *must* be responded to and the correspondent kept apprised of progress. The procedure for doing so is as follows:

- Having received an enquiry/complaint, the Councillor should acknowledge receipt (in writing) and advise of what action is intended to be taken
- Advise when that action has been taken and what to expect next (i.e. a response is now awaited from (a third party))
- Report back on the outcome of the enquiry or ensure that either the third party or the Parish Clerk will/has report(ed) back on the matter

Councillors must ensure that any and all communication with the public on Council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of the Council regardless of the Councillor's own views on the subject.

### **3.0 Evaluation**

It is extremely important that the Council measures the success of this strategy so that it may inform any amendments to this strategy.

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*As agreed at Yaxham Parish Council meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2018*