



LinkedIn



Communications Protocol

Minshull Vernon & District Parish Council

Adopted: 18 May 2015

www.minshullvernonparish.org.uk

1 INTRODUCTION

This Protocol has been drawn up in accordance with the “Governance Toolkit for Parish and Town Councils” prepared as a partner publication by *Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, Society of Local Council Clerks, Standards for England, the National Association of Local Councils and the Local Government Association*. It also takes into account the principles in the National Code for Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2001.

The Protocol also includes e-mail etiquette extracted from Debrett's.

The Code of Practice aims to help local government communicate effectively and impartially so that legitimate political debate is not stifled. It states “*The main purpose of local authority publicity is to increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs; to explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities; and in general to improve local accountability*”.

2 GENERAL PRINCIPLES (COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC)

The Council's communications will be open and honest in dealing with the media.

In accordance with Standing Order No. 27, all requests from the press or other media, for an oral or written statement, or comment from the Council shall be processed in accordance with the Council's policy in respect of dealing with the press and/or other media.

- The purpose of press releases is to increase public awareness of the Parish Council's activities. All press releases must be written by the Clerk, who will, if appropriate, consult parish councillors individually, or the Parish Council as the corporate body.
- Proactive media releases will be issued to promote a decision or work of the Parish Council.
- Reactive press releases will 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.
- Information bulletins (which are posted on the website and notice-boards) will be used when it is necessary to provide vital information to the public very quickly; for example, the outcome of a specific planning application.
- Other press releases will report the decisions and outcomes of the Council's activities, and explain the reasons for them.
- The Clerk will be responsible for clearing all press reports, or comments to the media, in consultation with the Chairman of the Council or the Chairman of the relevant committee/sub-committee.
- The media will on occasions attempt to by-pass the Clerk; however, it is essential that all communications are co-ordinated and managed through the Clerk. Where parish councillors are contacted direct by the media, they should refer them to the Clerk.
- The Parish Council occasionally works with partners, mostly from the public sector, and in these circumstances, their contribution should be acknowledged.
- Press reports from the Parish Council, its committees or working groups shall, in general, be sent from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- In addition to the Clerk, the Chairman, or in his/her absence, the Vice-Chairman (if a Vice-Chairman has been elected) shall be authorised to speak to representatives of the media in respect of Parish Council matters, where specifically authorised so to do.

- 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 request that this be clearly reported as their personal view.
- Unless a Parish Councillor is absolutely certain that he/she is reporting the view of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view. [The only clear way of being aware of the Council's view is if the matter has been discussed at a Parish Council meeting, and a decision made on that item.]
- It should also be noted that on occasions, the most effective strategy is not to respond to the media.
- Press releases will not be used to comment on national political debates unless of specific relevance to this Parish Council.
- All media releases issued by the Council will include a quotation from the Chairman (or, in his/her absence, the Vice-Chairman, if there is one); if it is not possible to contact the Chairman or Vice-Chairman a quotation will be attributed to the Chairman.
- The Clerk will be the first point of contact for the media; however, where it is appropriate for an elected Member to represent the Parish Council, the Chairman or Vice-Chairman shall be authorised as the official spokesperson for the Council.
- Individual Members will not be permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council.
- In the restricted period before an election (ie from the date of the Notice of Election to election day), commonly known as “*purdah*” media releases will not include quotes from Members who are due for re-election; this is mainly of relevance to the Borough Council, but it is helpful for parish councillors to be mindful of the provision.
- One of the key principles of communication is to communicate when there is nothing to report. Do not create a hiatus between one action and the next. Your audience needs to know the reasons for non-action.

3 PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

- The first 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 should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- No individual Parish Councillor should communicate direct with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries should be through the Clerk.
- No individual Parish Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council (or its committees/sub-committees). [In particular, Parish Councillors do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a “need to know”.]
- All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Parish Council, using Council letter-headed paper.
- 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.

- Correspondence sent on behalf of the Parish Council to the Borough Council shall also be copied to the Ward Councillors.

4 PARISH COUNCILLOR CORRESPONDENCE WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES

The Clerk sends out the Council's correspondence to other bodies. Correspondence from individual Parish Councillors should be avoided; however, there may be exceptional situations when it is appropriate for a Parish Councillor to issue correspondence in his/her own name. Such correspondence must be authorised by the Parish Council and the correspondence must make it clear that it has been written in an official capacity and has been authorised.

5 AGENDAS FOR PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS

In accordance with Paragraph 1 (4) (a) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, agendas will be published no later than 3 clear days before a meeting (this excludes the day of publication and the day of the meeting – Saturdays are included within this calculation).

Where the Clerk or a Parish Councillor wishes fellow councillors to receive matters 'for information only' in respect of items on the agenda, this will be circulated via the Clerk.

Note: This applies to items on the agenda only. Parish Councillors are entitled to share any other information they wish with their colleagues. In these circumstances, it can be helpful for the Clerk to be copied in.

6 COMMUNICATION BY E-MAIL

E-mail has replaced many traditional forms of communication, both oral and written. The writer of an e-mail must remember that their message may be stored permanently, and that there is no such thing as confidentiality in cyberspace.

- Delicate communications should therefore be sent by other means, and the writer must think carefully before hitting 'send' if the message is written in haste or when emotions are running high.
- Avoid sarcasm and subtle humour unless you know that the reader will 'get it'. If in doubt, err towards the polite and formal, particularly where you are not well-acquainted with the recipient.
- Think carefully about using smiley faces, 'kisses' etc. Are these symbols really suitable for the recipient? They are certainly not business-like.
- Using capital letters is e-mail shouting and should be avoided. If you want to emphasise something, try underlining or using italics.
- Aim to stick as closely as possible to the conventions of traditional letter-writing. Close attention should be paid to spelling and grammar, and the habit of writing in lower case throughout should be avoided.
- A well thought-out subject line will ensure that the message gets the attention it deserves. Do not reply to an e-mail on a different subject, without changing the subject-line as this causes confusion for the recipient who may well store e-mails in a subject-folder and/or could have difficulty finding the e-mail again if it is the wrong subject.
- E-mails will often be printed and filed, and therefore close attention must be paid to layout. Again, treating the construction of an e-mail just as you would a 'real' letter is the most effective approach.

- Where there is more than one recipient, list them alphabetically or, in the business environment, according to hierarchy. This applies also to the 'cc' line.
- Take care when selecting 'reply to all'. Although the original e-mail might be suitable for all recipients, there are occasions when the reply is not. As an example, the Clerk might issue an agenda and other accompanying documents to parish councillors and the press. A parish councillor might wish to make a comment on the documents and whilst this might be appropriate for parish councillors, it might not be appropriate for the press to receive those comments.
- Blind copying (bcc) should be used with discernment; it is deceptive to the primary recipient. As an alternative, the e-mail should be forwarded to the third party, with a short note explaining any confidentiality, after its distribution. If blind copying is essential; eg for a confidential document where all recipients must remain anonymous; then senders should address the e-mail to themselves, and everyone else as 'bcc' recipients.
- If you send an e-mail in error, contact the recipient immediately by telephone and ask them to ignore/delete the message.
- It is polite to reply to e-mails promptly; a simple acknowledgement with a promise that you will give the e-mail your full attention at a given later point is preferable to 'sitting on' the message.
- Never use e-mail to reply to correspondence or an invitation that was not sent by e-mail or does not supply an e-mail address as an RSVP option.
- The Clerk's communication with parish councillors is often crucial to the effective management of Parish Council business. Responses are not always required, but Members should respond if so requested.