

Dorchester Parish Council

Policy for Communications and Social Media

1. Introduction

This document summarises the Dorchester Parish Council policy for internal and external communications using all social media. Its purpose is to develop effective engagement with the Dorchester community through finding out their needs and communicating to the public and interested organisations what the Parish Council is doing to meet its legal obligations and wider community aspirations.

The Dorchester community comprises:

Residents of the Parish

- Users of Parish Council Services
- All those who work or own businesses in the Parish.
- All people who live/go to school in the Parish
- All voluntary organisations, churches, clubs and societies operating in or representing groups with the Parish

The Parish Council will also maintain good communication and strong working relationships with organisations which can impact the community including South Oxfordshire District Council, Oxfordshire County Council, neighbouring Parish Councils, and the Police.

The council defines communication as the process of exchanging information. This may be verbally, in writing or by other means to provide information on decisions made, options considered and actions taken.

The Council will engage with the community in a transparent manner to help inform opinions and review decisions.

The Council is open to feedback and is committed to encouraging the community to engage with the Council.

The Policy applies to Council members and employees.

2. Parish Council Correspondence (including email)

The point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence should be addressed.

Most official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council on council letter headed paper. However, other council members acting for the council may send correspondence but must always copy the Clerk on such correspondence in the name of the Council on council letter headed paper.

Where correspondence from the Clerk is copied to another person the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to another person.

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 the right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless it is pertinent to their official duties.

3. Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-committees and Working Parties

Agenda items should be clear and concise. Together with any associated papers there should contain sufficient information for Councillors to make an informed decision and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are being made at a meeting.

Items for information should be kept to a minimum.

Where a Councillor or the Clerk wishes Councillors to receive matters for “information only” they should be circulated by the Clerk.

4. Parish Council Engagement with the Public and Promotion of Activities

4.1. General Statement of Policy

- The Parish Council Website is the primary source of information on Council Business and Services provided.
- The Council Notice Boards located in the High Street & Queen Street will publicise meeting agendas and Councillor details.
- The Council will publish articles in the Dorchester News Magazine to keep those who don't have access to the internet or social media up to date.
- The Council may use all Social Media, to promote events and to provide news and updates to services.
- The Council will set aside time at every Council meeting for members of the public to discuss issues with councillors.
- The Council will appoint members to represent the Council on community organisations when requested.
- From time to time, the Council may seek volunteers to “sit” on working groups to enhance communication and engagement.
- The Clerk has delegated authority to determine the most appropriate form of communication method to ensure the timely

dissemination of information whilst adhering to this and other Council Policies.

4.2. Parish Council Communication with the Press and Public

- The Clerk is the nominated Press Officer and will clear all press notices or comments to the media with the Chairman of the Council or the relevant committee Chair.
- Press Reports from the Council, its Committees or working parties will come from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, councillors asked for comment by the press should make it clear that they are not speaking for the council and any views expressed are their own unless they are relating an approved council policy or decision.

It is not permitted to make any public statement on behalf of the Council which is not supported by a Council decision.

5. Parish Council News Items and Articles

- The Clerk will seek and facilitate all opportunities to promote the activities and decisions of the Parish Council through regular news items such as:
 - Postings on the Parish Council Website and other social media outlets
 - Articles in Dorchester News Magazine
 - Preparation and issuing of press releases
 - Preparation of articles, subject to council approval for issue to the media.

6. Gathering the views of the Community

- The Council encourages engagement with the community so that views can be heard and needs established.
- This will be achieved through both informal and formal means. Informal gathering can include Councillors day to day contact with the Community and attendance at meetings with local organisations.
- More formal means of gathering views include holding formal public consultations where there is a legal obligation, for example, prior to approval of the Neighbourhood Plan. Public meetings may be held at other times, although public participation in regular Council Meetings is encouraged as the primary formal method for the Community to make their views known.
- From time to time the Council may undertake surveys either in paper form or via email and weblink to gather responses to structured

questions. These will be carried out in compliance with data protection legislation, the Council's data protection policy and in accordance with the section of this policy regarding email.

7. Communication with Council Staff

The Clerk is the Responsible Officer who will assess Councillors requests against the backcloth of her statutory responsibilities.

As a guideline, emails should be acknowledged within two working days.

8. Parish Council use of Email

General standards. This policy operates in conjunction with the Council's Privacy Policy.

- All email correspondence should be dealt with in the same professional and diligent manner as written correspondence. Any email that is sent will be identifiable as coming from the Council, therefore, in particular, no message should be sent, either internally or externally, which contains junk mail, chain letters, cartoons, jokes, illegal, offensive, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, racist or abusive material (for example, pornography); libellous, defamatory, harassing, discriminatory material; knowingly unlawful, threatening, harmful material or content which may bring the Council into disrepute.
 - Councillors and Council employees are expected to use the Parish Council email system effectively and responsibly only in the course of parish duties and in accordance with approved operational and security standards.
 - Councillors and employees equally have a responsibility to ensure that their use of email in the workplace does not impact adversely on the council and its business, compromise their contractual relationship with the council, or breach Council policy.
 - Messages should not breach any copyright laws and respect the rights of others when sending emails. Email should not be used to harass or discriminate.
 - Anyone aware of any abuses of this policy should report these to the Clerk.
 - Anyone uncertain about any aspects of this policy and how it applies to them, please discuss with the Clerk.

8.1. Council Email addresses and use of personal Email

- Email addresses are provided by the Council to assist Councillors and employees in carrying out their duties and work.
- All Councillors will be provided with an email address in the form of forenamesurname@dorchesteronthames-pc.gov.uk.
- Council employees will be provided with an email address only if their job requires one. These email addresses will be in the form of

job Councillors and employees should ensure that these Council email addresses cannot be accessed by unauthorised users and should be used for Council business only.

- Private and personal email addresses must not be used for Council business. Forwarding email from your Council email address to a personal address is not permitted.
- The sender is responsible for emails they send. Emails could be used as evidence in a tribunal or other court proceedings. If there is a Freedom of Information or Subject Access Request then all of your Council related emails will need to be read, including any forwarded to personal email accounts in contravention of this policy.
- Using a Council email address to send inappropriate material, as detailed but not restricted to the above, is strictly prohibited and will amount to gross misconduct.
- Should you receive any offensive or inappropriate content via your Council email address, you should inform the Clerk of this as soon as possible so that they can ensure that it is investigated if necessary. This content should be removed from the system on the instructions of the Clerk, once any investigation is completed.
- Email messages cannot be guaranteed to be private and secure and, ideally, all emails should only be seen by the intended recipient. Copying to and copying in recipients on an ad-hoc basis should not be standard practice. Ask yourself if all the recipients really need to see the email you are sending. The use of BCC copying should not be used unless it is absolutely necessary.
- Messages should also not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details
- Wherever possible, confidential, sensitive or personal data should not be sent by email. If this sort of information needs to be sent in this manner then prior approval should be sought from the Clerk or Council. Sending confidential information via email without proper authorisation may be treated as misconduct. Particular care should be taken when sending confidential information to ensure that the email has been correctly addressed, marked “Confidential” and not copied to those not authorised to see the information.
- Users are responsible for keeping virus software up-to-date to mitigate the risk to the Council Systems.

8.2. Incoming Email

- Any Email received from an unknown source that contain attachments should not be opened as they may contain viruses.
- Council members may be emailed by members of the community. Councillors should reply briefly, making no comment other than saying that they will pass

the email to the Clerk for action. Councillors must ensure that any/all communication with the public on council related matters is directed through the Executive Clerk.

- Councillors and employees using Council email addresses should ensure that replies to any email correspondence are made within seven days.
- Deleting old emails Emails should, as a general rule, be deleted after six months. All emails to the Clerk, can be deleted after six months without exception.
- Employee emails will be archived and a deletion period set by the Clerk.
- Emails between Councillors or those dealing with specific committees should be deleted or saved as the sender/recipient sees fit.
- Councillors will be asked annually to confirm in writing that they have deleted emails that they no longer need.

8.3. Email Lists

- Some activities will involve the creation of email lists of members of the community or other bodies that the Council wish to communicate with.
- The Clerk or Chair of committee, working group is responsible for the creation and maintenance of such lists and ensuring that any recipient can get themselves removed from the list. The Parish Council Data Protection Policy will be adhered to at all times.
- Only the Clerk or delegated person is empowered to send authorised Council communications to the prepared lists.
- Any lists used for notifying residents of businesses about Parish events or incidents will not be used more than once per week.

9. Social Media (describes a range of websites and online tools)

9.1. Policy Statement

Social media has a growing role in enabling improved contact and engagement between the Parish Council and the people and organisations it serves.

This Social Media Policy explains how the Parish Council will use social media to improve the way it communicates with local residents, local businesses and the local and central government bodies it deals with.

This policy sets out what is acceptable and not acceptable. It should be read in conjunction with the Code of Conduct for Councillors.

Scope

Social Media describes a range of websites and online tools which allow people to interact. This includes platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Linked-In, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat and internet-based websites.

Social Media is a powerful means of sharing information and encouraging participation and engagement particularly through interest groups and online communities. It should be noted, however, that it is not a substitute for other forms of communication and engagement which remain crucial especially for those who do not regularly use the internet.

This policy relates to social media communication which is published by or on behalf of the Parish Council or any individual in their capacity as a councillor.

9.1 Key Principles

The rules which govern councillor behaviour apply equally to social media, however, the immediacy, ease and speed of dissemination amplify the need for content and comments to be carefully thought through.

- All communication is capable of misinterpretation. The immediacy and lack of face to face contact with a social media message can magnify this problem. Information and comments can be broadcast to large numbers of people very quickly.
- Although informal in style, all social media content is recorded and permanent so content must be accurate, informative and reflect policy decisions made by the Council.
- There is no requirement for a councillor to be a user of social media to communicate with the public.
- Councillors using social media should make it explicitly clear whether they are communicating in a private capacity or as a councillor.
- Councillors who have a personal social media account should make it clear in their profile details that “all views are their own”.

9.2 Responsibilities

The Clerk is responsible for all formal communication between the council and members of the public and will be responsible for maintaining the Parish Council Website, and any other form of social media the Council consider to adopt.

- Other platforms are not currently being used for Parish communication; however, the Clerk and Councillors can propose the use of other platforms such as Instagram subject to Council approval.
- It is understood that individual councillors may be communicating on social media and it is their responsibility to comply with the usage guidelines outlined below. The overarching rule is that councillors should not make commitments on behalf of the

Council, bring the Council into disrepute and should respect confidentiality.

9.3 General Social Media Guidelines

All social media communications from the council will meet the following criteria:

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant
- Not contain content that is unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or offensive
- Not contain content for which the Parish does not own the copyright
- Not contain any personal information other than required basic contact details

Councillors should comply with the Code of Conduct for Councillors when they are acting in an official capacity or could appear to be acting in an official capacity. For example, a Councillor would be seen as acting in an official capacity if publishing information that could only have been accessed by being a councillor.

Councillors must keep their personal and councillor profiles separate.

There are a number of potential legal issues:

Libel – publication of an untrue statement that an individual considers as damaging to their reputation could result in legal action.

Copyright – using images or text from a copyrighted source e.g. books or photos without permission could be a breach of copyright law.

Data Protection – personal data of individuals must not be published without express permission. If information is provided in an email or conversation, consent to pass on information to others should not be presumed.

Bias and Predetermination – Councillors should not say anything on social media (or anywhere) suggesting that they have made their minds up about an issue that is due to be formally decided. It is necessary to show that you attended a council meeting, committee or hearing prepared to take on board and weigh up all the evidence i.e. that you were persuadable to a different view. Failure to do this could result in a decision being challenged as invalid.

9.4 The Dorchester Parish Council Website

9.6.1 Purpose

The Parish Website is the primary electronic means of providing information about the village and Parish Council matters with the primary purpose of promoting easier engagement with the community.

While assisting the Council to meet its obligations to be transparent, it will not be used as a substitute for meeting obligations to make information available to the public by other means, for example, posting meeting agendas on Parish Notice Boards and making available minutes of meetings and policy documents via the Clerk.

9.5 Day to Day Management

The Website will be hosted by a 3rd party provider. The Council will have direct control of day to day editing and updating. The Clerk is accountable for making updates and is empowered by the Council to make routine updates without prior reference to the Council. A Third Party may be asked for support for making Website changes, provided associated costs are within the agreed budget and approved by the Council.

The Clerk will update the Full Council on substantial changes made to the Website via the Clerks Report.

9.6 Content

Website content will be accessible in line with legal regulation.

Every effort will be made to maintain up to date and accurate content but this cannot be guaranteed.

The following Council Information will be uploaded to the website:

- Details of Councillors
- Information on Council Services
- Meeting agendas and minutes
- Policy Documents
- Audit Reports
- Reports or surveys commissioned by the Council

The Website will also contain information and links which may be of use to residents. These will be updated from time to time; however, the Council cannot be held responsible for any inaccuracies in contact details or links.

The Website may include links to other websites or sources of information to assist the community in accessing views on issues of interest. The inclusion of such links is subject to Full Council approval and it must be made clear that the Council does not indorse any opinions expressed on other sites.

Councillors and other parties may submit material for inclusion on the website provided it is in line with the guidelines of this policy and is technically feasible.

Any request to include information on the Website should be made via the Clerk. The Clerk is empowered to edit or refuse any material, generally guidance will be provided on the reasons. Ultimately the Clerk is accountable to

the Council for any content decisions made.

Website material that is considered as Archival Material should be preserved without change to the content but can be restructured and reorganised as required.

In order to encourage wider engagement in Council business, in addition to the posting of formal documents, the Council Chairman may post matters of interest the “Chairman’s Update” or News sections.

10 Parish Council Logo

Currently the Council does not have a Logo, but may adopt one in the future. Use of the Parish Logo is prohibited without the prior agreement of the Clerk and / or Council.

11 Complaints

Any complaints about Parish Council Communication of any type including content or interactions on the Dorchester Council Website, should be made to the Clerk.

- Approved by Full Council

28th May 2025

- Review Annually or as
legislation requires.