

# **YELVERTOFT PARISH COUNCIL**

## **Communications Strategy**

### **The need for a Communications Strategy**

Yelvertoft Parish Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees, and stakeholders. Better communications lead to recognition and respect – reputation matters.

Achieving the council's aims and objectives requires good communication with every individual, group, and organisation we work with, or provide services for.

Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to make sure messages communicated by the Parish Council are consistent and accurate. But if communication is managed effectively, the Parish Council can create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this strategy is to strengthen community engagement, and communication with all residents and businesses in Yelvertoft parish.

Yelvertoft Parish Council will:

- Facilitate community engagement by both informing and engaging. This includes actively listening to people and what they tell us about projects, initiatives, services and events in Yelvertoft and responding effectively using a variety of media.
- Promote and build a positive environment and a strong, supportive community.
- Focus on current issues and look forward, embracing new thinking and ideas.
- Tell residents what action it is taking on their behalf.
- Inform the public about how the annual parish precept is spent and manage expectations.
- Promote other organisations that provide benefit to residents e.g. community groups.

### **Objectives**

- To raise awareness of the Council and keep people informed of its priorities, activities, aims and objectives.
- To understand who lives in Yelvertoft parish and apply different communication and engagement methodologies that are inclusive, and successfully connect, inform and support delivery of the Yelvertoft Parish Plan and aligned activities and initiatives.
- To build the capacity and motivation of residents and partners to be involved with Parish Council initiatives and planning.
- To work collaboratively with all media, to ensure the accurate presentation of our proposals and responses.
- To provide relevant and up to date information e.g. a database of local organisations and groups that provide support and services for the benefit of the community.

- To build trust by being open and transparent.
- To share success and a sense of movement towards creating and building a strong, supportive community.
- To ensure the Parish Council is aware of and responds in a timely manner to what the people of Yelvertoft parish want and need to know.
- To use a variety of digital and traditional communication channels to make sure the information we provide is accessible for the whole community.
- To ensure our messages are relevant, clear, and factual to ensure maximum impact and interaction between the Parish Council and our community.
- To provide a user-friendly website to drive interaction with our audiences.

### **Focus of communications**

The following will underpin all Parish Council communications:

- The Parish Council makes a difference. It acknowledges and celebrates success with a focus on the positive aspects of living and working in the parish.
- The Council wants to hear the views of others and will use a variety of methods e.g. surveys and feedback to gather data which will inform and shape its response. There is a “circle of communication” – information is gathered and fed into the Council’s actions, providing feedback to those who have provided the views/data etc. and others, to say what actions have resulted (and the rationale if no action has been taken).
- All areas of Yelvertoft parish will be acknowledged and represented.

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

Research by MORI, an independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, states the most important drivers of council reputation among local residents are:

- Perceived quality of services overall
- Perceived value for money
- Media coverage
- Direct communications
- Council performance
- Clean, green, and safe environment
- Positive experiences of contact with council employees and contractors.

If the council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage, and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of our communications strategy.

There is also a need for proactive and reactive information:

- Proactively – telling people information to influence and change attitudes.
- Reactively – giving residents information they want to know.

## **Communication Principles**

Five principles underpin the strategy. Our communication channels need to:

- Be accessible for all
- Be convenient to access
- Help manage expectations
- Be relevant, clear, and factual
- Encourage two-way positive engagement and to 'act together'.

### Identifying newsworthy items

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Parish Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Parish Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk to make the decision as to whether or not a press release should be issued.

### Handling media enquiries

The Parish Clerk co-ordinates all formal media enquiries to the Parish Council. Members and Parish Council staff who are directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without establishing the full facts. If Members are in any doubt they should consult the Parish Clerk.

The Parish Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations, or allegations about individual staff and Members. The phrase "no comment" should not be used as a response to a media enquiry unless there is a very good reason to do so and it has been approved by Council. The Parish Council is open and accountable and should always try to explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

### Managing negative issues

From time to time the Parish Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Members and Officers must alert the Parish Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest is known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media. Members and Officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Parish Council about an issue.

### Correcting inaccurate reporting

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Parish Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the Parish Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor, or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who the most appropriate person to take the agreed action is.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain; each case should be judged individually.

Occasionally the Parish Council will get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising, and stating how the Parish Council will learn from the error or put it right.

### Interviews

Any member of staff or elected Member who is contacted by a journalist requesting an interview in their capacity as a representative of the Parish Council should refer the matter to the Parish Clerk or Chairman. The situation and the information required by the journalist will inform the choice of person put forward for interview.

### Media coverage of council meetings

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Parish Council and Committee meetings. During meetings Members and Officers should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what may be a complex issue.

Where a meeting of the Parish Council and its committees includes an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Parish Council's Standing Orders. Both the media and the public are entitled to film and record council meetings held in public.

## **Information Requirements**

### 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 (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt. The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure. In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data.

The Data Protection Act prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

The Parish Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The Parish Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Parish Council's standing orders, under contract or by common law. Parish Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the code of conduct adopted by the Parish Council, a copy of which is available via the Parish Council's website.

### Individual Councillors Policy

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Members involved in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest. It is also to ensure that the Parish Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner.

This policy does not seek to regulate Parish Councillors in their private capacity but does provide advice and guidance on their sensible use of conventional and social media. The Parish Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Parish Council. If the views of Parish Councillors are different to the Parish Council's corporate position and views, it is the responsibility of every councillor to make this distinction clear.

Subject to the obligations on Parish Councillors not to disclose information referred to in the "Freedom of Information and data protection" section and not to misrepresent the Parish Council's position, Parish Councillors are free to communicate their position and views.

In all cases, the Parish Council's approach, in accordance with the Code and the Guide, is that all individual councillor communications should:

- be lawful
- be cost effective
- be objective
- be even-handed
- be appropriate
- have regard to the Parish Council's policies, particularly Equality and Diversity
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity (e.g. elections).

**If in doubt, never say anything you will be uncomfortable repeating in court.**

### **Methodology**

- Coherence and coordination is required. This is led through the Parish Council's Clerk under the guidance of the Chair.
- A schedule of delegation is in place and the Chair has the final say on any key messages being communicated.
- Briefings/lines to take are provided to councillors and staff on issues that are likely to be controversial, detailed, and complex and which come to prominence.
- The Clerk owns the social media accounts and ensures best practice is followed, with regular reviews to ensure that the benefits are being realised.
- The Yelvertoft Parish Council brand is developed and used appropriately. The audience should connect with the messages and be able to recognise and trust the origin. The style should reflect a diverse audience and consideration should be given to those who are dyslexic, sight impaired, or have other reading difficulties. The brand, logo, colour palette, font and presentation style will be agreed by full Council.
- Targets and measures of success are agreed – quantitative and qualitative data are recorded e.g. the number of people who attend a community open meeting; the type and level of questions/information requested from residents.
- The following should be reviewed annually:
  - Communications Strategy
  - Branding/house style
  - Surveys/feedback/data gathered
  - Use of social media
  - Engagement with partners and press.

## Methods of communication and engagement

The Parish Council will use a variety of methods based on what reaches people most effectively and has most credibility.

<b>Correspondence (general)</b>	The Council will respond promptly to all external correspondence requiring a reply. External consultations will be acknowledged and responded to (or a nil response made) within the consultation period.
<b>Parish Council meetings</b>	All meetings (including standing committees) are open to the public and press and advertised on the website, via social media accounts, newsletters, notice boards, and other suitable locations. Agendas and minutes are available to all, either electronically, via the Parish Council website, or in hard copy from the Clerk.
<b>Parish Meeting</b>	The Parish Meeting is for all residents to come together to discuss whatever aspects of community life they wish. The (statutory) annual Parish Meeting is usually held in April.
<b>Parish Council website</b>	The Parish Council website is updated by the Clerk. It is the responsibility of all councillors to check the site regularly for any issues of inaccuracy or omissions and to inform the Clerk who is the website controller.
<b>Social media</b>	The Council has a Facebook account that is controlled by the Clerk.
<b>Parish Council notice boards</b>	All Parish Council owned notice boards within the parish are to be used to display the names and contact details of Parish Councillors, schedule of council and committee meetings, agendas, newsletters, and ad hoc information. There may be notice boards that are not sponsored by the Parish Council. Note: The notice boards are a 'signpost' to residents that they live within the boundary of Yelvertoft Parish Council.
<b>Parish Council newsletter</b>	A quarterly newsletter will be produced, and posted on the website, notice boards, social media, and business and community locations. Hard copies will be made available if required. A trial of supplying all households with a hard copy will be carried out in the first 6 months.
<b>Special topic or event posters</b>	Posters promoting the Parish Meeting, recruitment of staff or councillors, etc. are posted on notice boards, social media, and website and are made available from the Clerk.
<b>Press releases</b>	Where the Council decides to use external media to promote significant points of interest or achievement, it will issue a press release to local media.
<b>Items of Interest</b>	Items of interest relating to the parish are published in the Council newsletter, social media, and the Parish Council website.
<b>Community events</b>	The Council can host one-off, ad hoc community consultations seeking to hear resident's views on specific issues or developments.
<b>Surveys and Feedback</b>	These are a key component of listening and it is important that the Council acts on the information gathered. An annual plan will be in place to gather data and information. This information will be reviewed by the Clerk and any key points raised at the monthly Council meeting for action.

## **Communication Channels**

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

1. Parish Council website
2. Social media
3. Consultations and feedback forms
4. Correspondence (general)
5. Direct responses (email, phone, in person representations)
6. Parish Council meetings
7. Parish Council working groups, Committees, Task & Finish groups
8. Nominated Parish Council spokesperson
9. Annual Parish meeting
10. Parish Councillors
11. Features submitted to local newsletters
12. Posters, flyers, newsletters
13. Village notice boards
14. Networking links with partners/stakeholders.

## **Website**

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

## **Social media**

Social media can be used by the Parish Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

The aim of this part of the policy is to make sure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Parish Council-based services through the use of social media

- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media
- That Parish Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines, and relevant legislation
- That the Parish Council is not brought into disrepute.

Social media activity isn't something that stands alone. To be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be included in social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

The Council has a Social Media Policy which is published on the website.

### **Open government**

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all committee agendas, reports, and minutes are sent to the media on request, five working days prior to the meeting. In practice, Yelvertoft Parish Council provides these via the website. The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings. Relevant councillors and officers will be available following committee meetings for comment or interview. Public and media participation in a meeting is regulated by procedural standing orders.

The Council is aware of its responsibilities under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and has published on its website a schedule of publications that contains all policy and procedural documents. All decisions of the Council, made in an open meeting, may be quoted and made available to the media.

The Openness of Local Government Regulations 2014 which apply to England, give rights to members of the press and public to:

- use modern technology and communication methods such as filming, audio-recording, blogging and tweeting to report the proceedings of the meetings of their councils and other local government bodies.
- see information relating to significant decisions made outside meetings by officers acting under a general or specific delegated power.

In common with all Councils, certain agenda items are debated in a closed session of a committee meeting. The guidelines for the items that will be heard in closed session are covered by the Local Government Act 1972 and the Council's Standing Orders.

The Council reserves the right to withhold certain sensitive information concerning commercial transactions, for example contracts or the purchase and sale of land and property. This applies to the Council's own commercial interests and to the various parties involved in individual business transactions with the Council. This area and other matters are guided by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Data Protection Act 1998 and exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

### **House style**

Yelvertoft Parish Council has a 'house style'. The Clerk is the guardian of the 'house style' and must be involved in any external communication where a variation is proposed.

To ensure that all Council's communications have as much impact as possible, and conform to the requirements of the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988, messages will be:



- Short, to the point, and written in plain English
- Clear and not conflicting
- Based on fact, information, action or achievement
- Focused on opportunities for involvement
- Consistent with the Council's positions identified in minutes and policies.

Issues that are controversial or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council, will be handled with particular care. Issues will be presented clearly, fairly, and as arguments. The Council will not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards, and will not mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.

The tone of voice of a written document can be more important than the tone of voice of something that is spoken, because once something is written down and published; correction is a longer and more difficult process. Special care should be taken to avoid provocative, emotive, or 'loaded' language that reflects value judgements. Council's written communications must be:

- Authoritative without being authoritarian
- Approachable without being casual
- Accurate in terms of grammar, spelling and phraseology without being old fashioned
- Concise without being economical with the truth
- Considered without withholding essential information

#### **Communications: Schedule of Delegation**

❖ The default position is that the Clerk must approve every significant communication issued on behalf of the Council, including press releases.

❖ If the issue is delegated, the Chair, Vice Chair, and Clerk must be copied into responses, and their advice sought as appropriate.

#### **Schedule of Delegated Authority to communicate on behalf of the Parish Council**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Delegated to</b>	<b>Conditions</b>
Council Minutes	Clerk	
Council internal administration	Clerk	
Finance	Clerk	
Personnel	Chairman	
Governance	Clerk	
Communications	Councillors / Clerk	Social media accounts and communications via the website are delegated to the Clerk
Planning	Planning Committee or Council	

Community Development (including all transport, energy and built/natural environment issues)	Council	
Social issues	Council	
Rights of Way	Footpath Warden or Clerk	High profile cases to be agreed by Council.
Allotments	Allotment Officer or Clerk	
Council responses to external consultations	Chairman or Clerk	Delegated to named lead under extreme time pressure only.

### **Relations with the media**

All formal approaches from press, radio or TV in relation to the Parish Council's business should be directed to the Chair or the Clerk.

Any press release must be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the Council's legal responsibilities have been adhered to, the reputation of the Council is protected (and ideally enhanced), that there is consistency of style including branding, and that the use of the release can be monitored. The Chair to approve all press releases.

### **Parish Council spokesperson**

It is important that, before an issue of high public interest becomes public knowledge and likely to be the subject of media enquiries, the Chair of the Parish Council is fully briefed. In such a situation they will work with the relevant councillors and the Clerk to produce a communication plan that will ensure that balanced, timely information is provided to keep all parties informed.

In the event of a general media enquiry, the Clerk (in conjunction with the Chair or Vice-Chair), will be responsible for issuing a response from the Council. Individual members of the Council must make clear, should they be approached for comment directly, whether they are giving an individual opinion or will be referring the matter to the Clerk for a formal Parish Council response. In any event, the Clerk must be notified of any contact with the media as soon as possible.

### **Guidance for councillors making personal statements**

- Councillors should not make personal statements that could damage the reputation of the Council, or have a negative impact on partnerships with other organisations, or on the credibility of the Council or other members
- Councillors wishing to make a personal statement to the media must clearly inform the media:
  - that their comment is made as an individual and is not necessarily the view of the Council
  - that other councillors may hold a different view
  - that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by the Council

### **Councillors' publicity before Parish Council Elections**

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for councillors and for publicity in connection with elections. The code

makes it clear that Council resources should not be used for publicising individual councillors *unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the Council.*

These extracts from the Code illustrate the main points:

- Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the Council (for example, Chair of Planning Committee) and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations, only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and ".....personalisation of issues or personal image making should be avoided."
- "Publicity should not be, or be liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor that are relevant to her/his position and responsibilities within the Council and to put forward her/his justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals."
- "The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity, in all its forms, of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election."

### **Publicity during elections**

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.

During this period Parish Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Parish Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required the relevant Officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this policy.

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature – this includes web advertising. There are additional requirements, such as imprint standards, for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

Accounts may need to be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities.

Political blogs cannot be linked from the Parish Council's website and the Parish Council will not promote any Parish Councillors' social media accounts during the election purdah period.

Parish Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Parish Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Any queries regarding publicity during a purdah period should always be referred to the Parish Clerk for further advice.

**Review**

The Council will oversee the development and implementation of the strategy. This will be reviewed by the Council annually.

**Adopted at the Parish Council meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2021.**

**Review date: May 2022.**

### Communications Plan for 2021

Method	Audience	Date	Aim	Cost	Action by
Survey Monkey Newsletter Website Facebook Posters Noticeboard Organisations Community groups Pub Shop Churches	All residents, including community groups, business, and organisations	June / July 2021	Survey all residents to find out their views on the proposed KGV Field improvements	FOC	Survey questions – Julie  Draft survey – KGV Field Working Group  Publication – Sam
Survey Monkey Newsletter Website Facebook Posters Noticeboard Organisations Community groups Pub Shop Churches	All residents, including community groups, business, and organisations	Sept / Oct 2021	Annual general survey to all residents asking for their views on the village and Parish Council	FOC	Survey questions – Sam  Draft survey – Sam  Publication – Sam
Parish News or hand delivery if no newsletter  Website Facebook	All residents, including community groups, business, and organisations	Nov 2021	Annual leaflet to all residents informing them of what the PC has done in the last year, what they are working on, aspirations	FOC	Draft Leaflet – Comms Working Group