

Necton Parish Council

Communications Policy



Document Control

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to set out how the Council communicates, consults and engages with its residents and how it will develop and improve its communications in the future.

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.

2.1 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 residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about services provided by the Council
- raise the profile of Necton 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 brand image or integrity of the council

2.2 What should we be communicating?

There are two methods of communicating:

- Proactive – telling people information to influence and change attitudes

- Reactive – giving residents information they have requested

Research by MORI, an independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, suggests that 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
- a clean, green and safe environment
- positive experiences of contact with council employees

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 its proactive and reactive communications.

2.3 Who should we be communicating with?

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

- Residents
- Breckland District Councilors and staff
- Norfolk County Councilors and staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people
- The media
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- 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 leaflets – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

Currently communication is achieved through:

- The Council's website
- Council agenda papers/correspondence
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultation
- A monthly inclusion in the Parish Link
- Direct access via Parish Office

- Noticeboards within the village
- Press releases (adhoc)

Ways in which communication could be improved:

- Improved visibility of the council and its activities by more frequent reporting
- Increase links with local media and publish more press releases
- Improved communication, by means of regular meetings, with relevant District/County Councillors
- Continue to improve the council's website to make it more user friendly including capturing data for a communication database
- Use of social media
- Better promotion of the council's online presence
- 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 plays a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital.

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.

All communication to the media by councillors in their Necton Parish Council role must be sent to the Parish Clerk or the Chairman of the Council for approval.

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"
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Parish Clerk or the 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.

2.4.2 Online presence - Improve the council's website

The council's website is to be regularly updated and is as much as possible kept up to date.

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 More frequent and 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 Promotion of the council's online presence

All communications promote the Council's website – included on official documents and on signature block of council email.

Breckland Council have a link to our website on their public Parish Council list. It is necessary to check this link continues to work.

2.4.5 Public Consultation - Carry out regular and effective consultation

At present, the council's consultation is limited to informal methods.

The council needs to establish means by which consultations will take place to cover all aspects of life in Necton so that a full understanding of the needs of the community is developed. Such consultation would inform a more relevant Action Plan for the Council. This in-depth consultation should be repeated every five years. This will help to ensure that the council is engaged, delivering relevant services 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, regular (annual) consultation should be undertaken by councillors to gather public opinion on perception and satisfaction of the council and the work it does. The results of this consultation would also help to better understand the council's strengths and weaknesses and would help the council to measure the effectiveness of its work in general and this strategy specifically.

The 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. Therefore an analysis of the format of this consultation needs to be undertaken including:

Who – develop an understanding of the demographics of the community and

How - establish ways of communicating with each of these that best encourages their engagement in the process

What – consider what information is required and develop relevant means of achieving this whilst still being appropriate, accessible and engaging

Where – define the best locations for accessing and engaging with the different groups identified

When – develop a timetable for the consultation process including when it is intended to hold consultation 'events'

Once completed, strategies for delivering services and improvements where identified should be developed with annual consultations held to measure effectiveness of the council's activities and reputation and a review of the in-depth consultation every five years.

2.5 Who (from the council) should be communicating?

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 communication with members of the community and outside bodies.

2.5.2 Councillors

Elected members will be regularly approached by community residents as this is part of their role. How enquiries from the public are dealt with by councillors will reflect on the council. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

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 sought the guidance of the parish clerk

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

1. having received an enquiry/complaint, the councillor should acknowledge receipt (if in writing) and advise of what action is intended to be taken
2. advise when that action has been taken and what to expect next (ie a response is now awaited from (a third party)
3. 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 communication with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of the council regardless of the councillors own views on any subject.

Any and all enquires by the media should be referred immediately to the parish clerk or chairman of the council.

The Council's Complaints and Complements policy should be considered alongside this item.

3.0 Evaluation

It is extremely important that the council measures the success of this strategy so that it may inform any future plan. A benchmark of the current state will be required.

What communication improvements can we measure?

- Media's assessment of Necton Parish Council's communication coverage
- Raised awareness of the Parish Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes of all stakeholders towards Necton Parish Council
- Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes
- Increased attendance at Public meeting and organized events.

How will we do this?

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys
- Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content usage
- Hits on website
- Number of Likes and Followers on Social Networking sites (if applicable)