

BLACKBIRD LEYS PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL

Scope

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2001 outlines a number of criteria and guidelines for local authorities to consider when publishing information for its public. This Practice document has been referred to when formulating this protocol. Also included in the revision of this document in September 2011 is the Model Protocol on Communications from the Governance Toolkit for Parish and Town Councils.

Parish Council

The Parish Council has powers which enable it to produce and circulate publicity regarding its functions and responsibilities. These powers are contained in sections of the Local Government Act 1972 (111, 142, 144 and 145).

At the present time the Parish Council produces; agenda, minutes, annual report, newsletter, website, leaflets, posters, noticeboard notices, press releases (this list is not exhaustive and may be subject to changes in the future).

1. Purpose for Parish Council Publicity

The Parish Council uses publicity to:

Primary Function

Raise awareness of:

- fulfil its legal obligations to notify the public of its meetings (forthcoming/past)
- the services and responsibilities of the Council
- Council activities, initiatives, achievements and successes
- how the Council represents the views of the electorate

Ensure the electorate has information on the proposed decisions the Council are to make and has made:

- agenda and minutes
- annual report, budgets, precept etc

Ensure the electorate has information on how to contact the Council:

- contact details for the Council and for Councillors

To consult on issues which it believes affects its community:

- consult on the Council budget and/or policies
- consult on any Council plans or surveys
- consult on any projects

To advertise:

- a Council event
- a Council employment vacancy or Councillor casual vacancy
- a Council election

To display or inform the electorate of available information on Council business:

- Council meeting minutes
- responses to planning applications
- annual report and annual return
- Council's budget
- Council policies

Secondary Function

If space allows, the Council's publications could carry local information for the benefit and knowledge of residents:

- to publicise local groups or organisations events
- an event of another authority/organisation it believes will matter or be of interest or assistance to residents
- advertise local events, initiatives, organised by legitimate organised bodies
- planning applications the Council is consulted on
- issues/developments or consultations it feels its community will be affected by

All the above will be published with regards to the conditions set out below.

2. Parish Council's Main Publications

The Parish Council produces; agenda, minutes, annual report, newsletter, website, leaflets, posters, noticeboard notices, press releases (this list is not exhaustive and may be subject to changes in the future).

Below are the two main ways the Council publishes information to electors:

Noticeboard

- First and foremost to display Council documents to satisfy its legal obligations.
- Display required information from statutory bodies such as; Auditor, Electoral Officer etc
- Display contact details for the Council and its Councillors.
- If space allows, display local events, information or helpful contacts.

Website

As the items above and...

- To display information, which has been previously published such as, minutes of meetings, precept budget etc.
- To display information which could not normally be published in a newsletter or noticeboard due to their size, items such as; Council documents, Councillor's photographs, planning lists, press releases and project photographs etc.

- Ensure any items displayed from other organisations or individuals cannot be construed to be organised, run or protected by the Council's insurance.

3. Responsibilities for Communications

A. Parish Council Correspondence

- (i) The 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.
- (ii) The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- (iii) 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 a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.
- (iv) All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letter headed paper.
- (v) 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 (e.g. copy to XX).

B. Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees etc

- (i) The agenda is set by the Clerk. The Clerk will liaise with the Chairman on requested items but the Clerk has the final word on what appears on the agenda.
- (ii) Agenda should be clear and concise. It should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision, and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- (iii) Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- (iv) Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

C. Communications with the Press and Public

- (i) The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chair of the Council or the Chair of the relevant committee.
- (ii) Press reports from the Council, its committees or working parties should be from the Clerk or an officer or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- (iii) Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view.
- (iv) If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure, or via a Council agenda item.

D. Communications with Parish Council Staff

- (i) Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the Council).
- (ii) No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the Council, the Chair of a committee or other meeting, or are styled “Leader” of the Council, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- (iii) Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Parish Council.
- (iv) E-mails:
 - Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated;
 - Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk;
 - E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk;
 - Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.
- (v) Meetings with the Clerk or other officers:
 - Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
 - Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer;
 - Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate Council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

4. Process

The Clerk is the editor of Council publications and will work using this protocol as reference to ensure compliance. If there is any doubt as to the content of a submission for any of the Council publications the Clerk will not publish the item and seek further advice, whether that be from the Chair, legal or professional.

5. Examples of Council Publication principles

- Council policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrate on facts or explanations or both.
- Council should only comment or respond to documents of others in an objective, balanced, informative and accurate way. It should set out reasons for views, not show prejudice or attack, or be party political.
- Service provisions should be reported factually.
- Contentious issues should be handled with care, presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible.
- Nothing should be published which would defame other authorities or personally attack people working for those authorities.
- No personal attacks (or what might appear to be) on any person, or position, should be published.
- Public funds should not be used to mount publicity campaigns where its primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.

- A general publication should never be limited or exclusively delivered or available to a specific area/part/group of the estate. If it is a general publication it should be available to the whole estate/electorate. This would not apply if the publication was an area specific publication.
- It should be minded that some information mechanisms such as a website are not considered to be fully accessible and should not solely be used for certain types or forms of consultations/communication.
- Items written or published for individual Councillors should not be disrespectful or derogatory to others in the Council or other local authority positions.
- Items written or published for individual Councillors should not personalise issues or be written for personal image raising purposes.
- Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being party political, or influence public opinion on policy. Material should never contain political slogans, logos or political party catch-phrases.
- An article by an individual Councillor should never campaign for their election or selection on any forthcoming elections, referendums and/or petitions.
- Council should exercise the utmost care in ensuring all items it publishes are legitimate, legal, official and/or organised and do not promote anything unethical, irresponsible or the lowering of moral standards.
- Never publish or display items from other organisations or individuals which may be construed to be organised, run or protected by Council insurance.