

# Communications Policy including Social Media & Electronic Communications

As adopted by Ruskington Parish Council on  
10 December 2024.

Minute ref: 8.1., page 92-2024

To be reviewed annually in December



**Purpose:** This Policy is designed to assist Parish Councillors, Officers and Staff to effectively, politely and helpfully communicate with the general public when responding to telephone or written enquiries, or when sharing information on its communication channels.

## 1. Objectives

To provide a helpful response to telephone, or written enquiries (including those formally received through electronic platforms) in an efficient and polite manner.

To offer guidance on the use of social media and other forms of electronic communication.

## 2. Personal Contact

This can be in person or by telephone.

During their working hours telephone calls are answered by the Administrative Assistant. If a matter relates to a Parish Council service, then the caller will be dealt with by the Clerk or Responsible Finance Officer. If they are unavailable, contact details will be taken to ensure the caller can be contacted at the earliest suitable opportunity.

If it relates to a County Council or District Council service, the caller will be advised to contact the County Council or District Council by providing them with the following appropriate number / e-mail:

- Lincolnshire County Council  
Telephone: 01522 552222  
Email: [customer\\_services@lincolnshire.gov.uk](mailto:customer_services@lincolnshire.gov.uk)
- North Kesteven District Council  
Telephone: 01529 414155  
Email: [customer\\_services@n-kesteven.gov.uk](mailto:customer_services@n-kesteven.gov.uk)

Parish Councillors, Officers, and Staff are advised against acting as an intermediary with the County Council and District Council Contact Centres; this is not being unhelpful, but to aid the trained staff of the County and District Council and /or their trained call centre staff to direct enquiries to the appropriate department or other public service. No direct dial numbers are to be given for any Officer(s) at either the County or District Council.

## 3. Written Enquiries

These could be by letter or, more frequently, by email. Wherever possible a detailed reply should be given within 5 working days. If that is not possible, a holding response should be sent within 5 days.

*There is no need to respond to unsolicited invitations, anonymous correspondence, or spam emails, indeed there are very good reasons for not so doing.*

Should the Parish Council receive repeated or vexatious communications from individual members of the public on the same subject(s), it is permissible for staff to merely acknowledge such

emails/letters without having to respond to each point. In any such case, the Clerk to the Parish Council should be consulted.

It should always be remembered that it is possible to recover any electronic correspondence.

### **Parish Council email**

The Clerk to the Parish Council has their official council work email address for most official communication with the Parish Council. The aim is to reply to all questions sent as soon as Council can within the Clerk's working hours. Please note, that the Clerk may work flexible hours to meet the needs of council. It is expected that a response to an email will occur at some point during the working week in which it is received. The Clerk is responsible for dealing with emails received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action.

An email for general enquiries, with a shared inbox for the Clerk, RFO and Administrative Assistant to administer may be made available to ensure that all emailed enquiries are dealt with in a speedy and efficient manner. It is expected that a response will be made at some point during the working week in which it is received. The Administrative Assistant will usually deal with these enquiries during their usual working hours and will forward emails on to the Clerk or RFO for attention as required.

All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk. All new emails requiring data to be passed on, will be followed up with seeking a data subject's written consent if the information is to be shared before action is taken with that correspondence.

Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

### **SMS (texting) and Messaging apps, e.g. WhatsApp.**

Members and the Clerk may use SMS and messaging apps as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

### **Video Conferencing**

This policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

### **Internal communication and access to information within the Council**

It is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors and staff are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Members should also be careful only to 'cc' essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

## **4. Parish Councillor Details**

The Parish Clerk to act as a conduit for all such requests for details and contact the Councillor on behalf of the requester. Council emails can be provided, but no personal contact details to be shared without the written consent of the councillor.

## **5. Media Statements**

Any media statements, issued on behalf of the Parish Council, are to be submitted by Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Clerk or the Deputy Clerk & Responsible Finance Officer (during the Clerk's absence), in consultation with any other Councillor as required and then copied to all Parish Councillors. No other member of staff has the authority to issue public statements on behalf of the Council unless given the authority to do so by the Chairman and Clerk, or the Council.

Press releases from the Parish Council need not be formally worded in stilted language but must not be partisan.

## **6. Pre-election period**

The pre-election period (formerly called Purdah) is the time between an election being announced and the date the election is held. It applies to Parish, Town and County Council elections as well as other national elections (e.g. a General Election). It also applies if there is a local by-election. During such a period, special care is needed to avoid any impression that the Parish Council, as a body, supports any aspirant for elected office or a particular party.

More specific advice will be issued by the District Council Returning Officer and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC).

## **7. Obscene & Abusive Language**

Staff and Councillors are not obliged to listen to abusive, harassing, and obscene tirades or to address members of the public in this way. In such a case the caller should politely be asked to desist and advised that if they continue to use such language the call will be terminated. If the abuse or obscenity continues, then the call can be terminated.

Please also refer to the Council's Civility and Respect Policy for further information.

## **8. Parish Council website**

Where necessary, Council may direct those contacting us to its website to see the required information, or Council may forward their question to Council for consideration and response. Council does not respond to every comment made or received and there is no obligation to do so.

The Council will maintain its website to provide transparency regarding its decisions and will comply with its Publication Scheme.

The Council may, at its discretion, allow approved local groups to have a link to their own website or source of information on the Council's website. The advertising of businesses is not permitted. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the website if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's standards to be on its Council's website.

## **9. Social Media and Electronic Communications Policy**

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables Council to interact in a way that improves communication both within the Council and between the Council and the community, businesses and agencies it works with and serves, and to promote our parish positively.

As well as the noticeboard and website, Council has approved the use of the social media channels below to publish information about the work of Ruskington Parish Council to a wider audience.

- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Instagram

- Next Door
- YouTube

Other channels of communication may be introduced to improve and expand the services Council delivers, and the policy will be updated to reflect this.

Official council business and the account will be managed by the Clerk to the Parish Council and may be administered by the RFO & Deputy Clerk, and the Administrative Assistant.

## **10. Guidance for Council, Officers, and Staff on the use of Council's Social Media**

Councillors, Officers, and Staff need to think about whether they are acting in a private capacity, or whether any impression might be conveyed that they are acting for or on behalf of Ruskington Parish Council. The Council has adopted a Code of Conduct which is binding on all members. Should Councillors use social media in an official capacity, they should always be mindful of the Code, and of the seven Nolan principles applicable to holding public office – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

- Ensure any Council facilities are used appropriately – if using a Council-provided social networking area, any posts are likely to be viewed as an official viewpoint
- Information that is published be civil, tasteful and relevant
- Information must be factual, fair, thorough and transparent
- Information that is not already known to be in the public domain – i.e., available on the Council's website, contained in minutes of meetings, stated in Council publicised policies and procedures, etc. must not be shared
- Personal and confidential information must not be shared
- Everyone must be mindful that information published in this way may stay in the public domain indefinitely, without the opportunity for retrieval/deletion
- Copyright laws must be respected
- Entering into online debates or arguments about the Council's work must be avoided
- Conversations or reports that are meant to be private or internal must not be published
- Social Media must NOT be used in the recruitment process for employees or new councillors – other than for the sole purpose of placing vacancy advertisements – as this could lead to potential discrimination and privacy actions, as well as breach of data protection issues
- Social media must not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.
- Information and events involving local schools, groups and the village churches may be shared on request
- Information and links from North Kesteven District Council, Lincolnshire County Council, the Environment Agency, Lincolnshire Police and other agencies may be shared as requested or in cases of emergency
- Information and advertising on behalf of businesses is not permitted
- Information must not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- Staff must remember that they will be seen as ambassadors for the Council and should always act in a responsible and socially aware manner

### **Third party use of Social Media**

Avoid making 'political' points, or derogatory comments about individuals.

- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official Council posts but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

Council's Social media sites are not monitored 24/7 and Council will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. Please do not include personal/private information in your social media posts to us. Sending a message/post via social media will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and Council will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information or services through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Clerk by email. The official email address is [clerk@ruskington-pc.gov.uk](mailto:clerk@ruskington-pc.gov.uk)

Council retains the right to remove comments or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements.
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy or send a brief response as appropriate. Repeated and vexatious communication will not be responded to. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. The Parish Council delegates the day-to-day administration to the Clerk. [This allows day to day administration to take place in accordance with S.101 Local Government Act 1972 without having to call a parish council meeting]. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible.

Repeat offenders will be blocked from the social media page. The Council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police or the external auditor for the matter to be properly investigated.

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct, Standing Orders and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council at all times.

**Confirmation that this Communication Policy is understood, and the measures will be followed:**

*Please note: If you do not understand any part of this policy please speak to the Clerk of Council.*

Name	Signature	Date