

# Dinnington St John's Town Council

# COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

March 2015

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## 1. Introduction

Dinnington St John's Town Council has undertaken to 'communicate, consult and engage'. The purpose of this policy is therefore to set out how the Council intends to achieve this and develop and improve its communications in the future.

## 2. Communication

### 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 the Town Council, the less likely they are to rate it highly.

The Town Council, through good communication, will understand and better meet the needs of the community, whilst also raising the profile of the 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 Dinnington
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as older, more isolated residents and 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 independent research organisations suggest that the most important drivers of Council reputation among local residents are:

- perceived quality of services overall
- perceived value for money
- media coverage
- direct and accessible communications
- positive experiences of contact with Councillors and staff

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

- Dinnington Town Councillors
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people
- The media
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- MPs
- Other public sector organisations (borough Council, police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the area
- Borough Council Officers

## 2.4 How should we be communicating?

The Council will ensure that information is easily accessible, relevant and timely and recognise the importance of communication and commit 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:

- Press releases
- The Council's website
- Council agenda papers/correspondence
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultation
- Social media – Facebook, Twitter

Ways in which communication could be improved:

- Improved visibility of the Council and its activities by more frequent reporting
- Manage local media more effectively by proactive use of press releases
  - Chair/Clerk will have authority to process press releases on behalf of the Town Council.
  - All Town Councillors are asked to process suggested contact/press release statements via the Chair/Clerk as per the Standing Orders.
- The introduction of a regular Parish Council newsletter
- Make better use of the Council's website 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. Whilst good relationships already exist, there is always room for improvement.

All communication to the media by Councillors in their Dinnington Town Council role must be sent to the Chair or the Town Clerk for approval.

Through the Chair and/or Clerk, 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 Town Clerk or the Chair.
- 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 Town Clerk or Chair (or in their absence, the Vice Chair) as per Standing Orders.

### **2.4.2 Online presence - Council’s website and Social Media**

The Council’s website and social media sites are to be updated on a regular basis (minimum being monthly).

### **2.4.3 Public Consultation - Carry out regular and effective consultation**

At present, most of the Council’s consultation is by way of occasional questionnaires on specific subjects and members interaction with the public.

The Council needs to establish means by which consultations will take place to cover all aspects of life in Dinnington so that a full understanding of the needs of the community is developed. An action plan and council priorities can then be developed, which will be reviewed annually. The in-depth consultation will 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’
- **Why** – the purpose of any consultation needs to be clear in order to achieve definite outcomes

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.

The starting point/review should take place at Annual Parish Meeting.

## 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 Town Clerk/Members of Staff

The Town Clerk has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies.

**Written communication:** the Town Clerk will have sole access to the council’s email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business.

The clerk is required to include a ‘signature’ as part of all email communication so that their name, position and contact information is provided.

**Verbal communication:** members of staff will be required to communicate on a regular basis with the community as part of their duties. It is imperative that staff handle all such communication with courtesy and professionalism at all times.

Any member of staff who is unsure of how to handle difficult, angry or vexatious complainants will be provided with the necessary training to ensure a positive outcome from such situations.

## 2.5.2 Councillors

Councillors will be regularly approached by members of the community 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 Town Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- request an item on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, updating the Town 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 town clerk will/has report(ed) back on the matter

Councillors must ensure that any/all 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.

## 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 the Town Council's communication coverage
- Raised awareness of the Town Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes of all stakeholders towards the Town 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 communications received via contact links on website
- Feedback from residents at Annual Parish Meeting