

Oulton Parish Council

Communications Policy

Document Control		
Adopted date	30 November 2020	Minute reference: 874.9.2
Next review date	November 2021	Minute reference: TBC

1. Introduction and Scope

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and provide guidelines.

Oulton Parish Council articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people information to understand accurately what Oulton Parish Council does, whilst also enabling Oulton Parish Council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications between council members and with third parties. A separate Press & Media Relations Policy should be considered in conjunction with this policy.

2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable Oulton Parish Council to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communication about issues, services and opportunities in the parish, the district and region
- be an effective voice of the community
- maintain and enhance the reputation of Oulton Parish Council
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of Oulton Parish Council or the parish

3. Who is Communicating?

3.1 Parish Clerk

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

The Parish Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

All official correspondence should be sent by the Parish Clerk in the name of the council using council letterhead paper, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Parish Council.

3.2 Councillors

Elected members will be 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 Oulton Parish Council. When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk will be sought.

At no time should councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to Oulton Parish Council. Depending on the issue, 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 is appropriate
- request an item on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk

Councillors must ensure that all communications with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of Oulton Parish Council, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject. Oulton Parish Council will agree its statements for release to the press and media.

All councillors are provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

Emails received by the Parish Clerk or Members may be disclosed following a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or following a subject access request under the Data Protection Act 1998, under the General Data Protection Regulation or in the course of legal proceedings.

3.3 Council Meetings and Councillor Interaction

- The Parish Council meets on the first Tuesday of the month (except January and August). Meetings start at 7.00 pm.
- The Annual Meeting of the Parish Council will be the May meeting when Councillors will elect the Chair and appoint the Vice-chair for the forthcoming year.
- The Annual Parish Meeting (a meeting of the electorate) will take place in May each year.
- The Parish Council will meet in Oulton Community Centre.
- A 15-minute discussion period for parishioners will be held near the beginning of the Parish Council Meeting.
- The Agenda is published on the parish website and displayed on the three parish noticeboards.

Councillors must ensure that they have read and understand any documents for discussion and come to meetings able to make an informed decision or identify information that is required in order for them to do so.

The use of mobile phones to take and receive calls is prohibited during Oulton Parish Council meetings. This is for the avoidance of distraction and to ensure focus.

An initial draft of the minutes shall be produced by the Parish Clerk and issued to all Councillors by email for review. Any amendments shall be made, and a subsequent draft issued for publication.

Councillors who have taken on responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall lodge a copy of such communications with the Parish Clerk.

4. General Principles

When writing communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed. Keep the communications relevant and concise. Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary.

Always write emails as if they are permanent because even when they have been deleted, they can often be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court or the Information Commissioner. Internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.

Information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive information that needs to be respected. Always respect the privacy of others.

Copy in (using cc) any appropriate officer or councillor.

5. Responsibilities and Accountabilities

Officers and Councillors alike are responsible for ensuring compliance with this and related policies.

6. Procedure

6.1 Agenda Items for Council, Committees and Working Groups

- Agendas should be clear and concise. They 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 the meeting.
- Communications between councillors regarding agenda items should have regard to the potential issue of pre-determination. While it is perfectly acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and information, councillors should ensure they retain an open mind and avoid comments that might give the perception of having reached a conclusion.

- Items for information should be kept to a minimum on the agenda.

6.2 Correspondence with external parties

- All correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed to the Parish Clerk. Councillors should forward any correspondence received to the Parish Clerk.
- If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a councillor, the matter should be referred to the Parish Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain.

7. Other Methods of Communication

7.1 Oulton Parish Website

The parish website is <https://www.oultontpsuffolk.info>

- The following items will be displayed permanently:
 - Parish Councillors names
 - Parish Clerk contact details
 - Parish Council meeting dates for the year
 - The draft Parish Council Minutes within a month of the meeting date
 - The approved Parish Council Minutes (uploaded within one week of approval)
 - The Council's Publication Scheme (a document which details information which can be requested from the Parish Council)
- Regularly updated and kept up-to-date.
- Links on the parish website from key partners, especially East Suffolk Council.
- The Parish Council meeting notice will be displayed at least three clear days in advance of the meeting.

7.2 Noticeboards

- The following items will be displayed permanently:
 - Parish Councillors with contact details
 - Parish Clerk contact details
 - Parish Council meeting dates for the year
- The three village noticeboards will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information.
- Notice of the annual audited accounts will be displayed when appropriate.
- The Parish Council meeting notice will be displayed at least three clear days in advance of the meeting.

7.3 Publications

- Oulton intends to start preparing and hand delivering its own newsletters to households in Oulton. Copies of the newsletters will also be available on the parish website.

7.4 Social Media

- Oulton Parish Council will investigate, in the future, the use of social media to promote activities of the Council.

7.5 Public Consultation

- Oulton Parish Council will set up established means of consulting with parishioners.
- Seek to consult with parishioners through all the stages of preparing the Oulton Neighbourhood Plan.
- Oulton Parish Council will agree upon a yearly Action Plan taking into consideration the needs of the community.

8. Alternative Formats

The Parish Council will provide information in other formats e.g. large print, other written language etc. The Parish Council now prepares its documents in accessible format. Should an older document not be accessible then contact the Parish Clerk who will do her best to convert it.

9. Comments

Any comments or queries regarding this document should be made to the Parish Clerk.

10. Evaluation

- Consultation with residents
- Hits on parish website
- Number of friends and followers on social network sites (if applicable)

11. Related Policies and Procedures

These include but are not limited to:

Code of Conduct
Complaints Policy
Data Protection Policy
Freedom of Information
Press & Media Relations Policy
Retention of Documents and Records Management Policy