

RUYTON XI TOWNS PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS, PRESS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

First adopted: July 2010
Revised: 2017, and Nov 2020
Reviewed: Nov 2021, Nov 2022
Next review: Nov 2023

Introduction

This policy aims to establish a protocol for effective communication and dissemination of information to Members, the press, and members of the public.

Purpose

1. Ruyton XI Towns Parish Council (“the council”) is committed to the provision of accurate information about its governance, decisions, and activities through various media. Where this information is not available via the Council’s publication scheme, please contact the Council’s clerk.
2. All communication will be conveyed in an open and straightforward manner. The Clerk to the Council is the Proper Officer of the Parish Council and is responsible for all formal communication between the Parish Council, the press, and members of the public. *In the event of the Clerk being unavailable the Chair will fulfil this role as a temporary measure.*
3. This policy does not seek to unnecessarily regulate councillors in their private capacity.
4. The Council shall, where possible, co-operate with those whose work involves gathering material for publication in any form including use of the internet (“the media”).

General communication procedure

The following procedure sets out how the Parish Council’s decisions and actions will be disseminated to interested parties.

1. When Council Members are asked for written information, they will direct any interested parties either to the Clerk to the Council or to the Parish Council’s website. Parish Council meeting minutes will only be available direct from the Clerk either in draft or approved format, as confusion has arisen in the past. (PC Decision 21/6/10)
2. The Chair will be responsible for presenting the Parish Council’s Annual Report at the Annual Parish Meeting. The Annual Report will be published in the Parish Council’s newsletter and on its website.
3. The Clerk to the Council is solely responsible for the preparation of notices of Parish Council meetings, agendas, and minutes.
4. The Chair is responsible for editing Parish Council newsletters and arranging for their publication following approval by members. As this may occur between meetings, email approval may be sought.
5. The Clerk is responsible for the maintenance of the Parish Council’s website. Current notices of meetings, agendas, approved and draft minutes, the Annual Report, adopted annual accounts, councillor contact details, and newsletters will be available through the website, along with other relevant information including that required by the Transparency Code.

6. All correspondence addressed to the Parish Council will be actioned by the Clerk. Information that needs to be considered by the Parish Council will be placed on the first agenda after its receipt, or if an urgent response is required, the Council shall follow the approved Scheme of Delegation.
7. Requests for information from members of the public will be dealt with according to the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Council's adopted Publication Scheme.
8. Agendas for Parish Council meetings will be accompanied with sufficient reports and information to enable Members to make an informed decision. Meeting papers supporting agenda items, e.g., Councillor reports, Clerk's report, finance and budget reports, etc., will be in writing and where possible issued at least 3 clear days prior to the meeting by email.
9. Agendas will be issued by email so that they are received by Members at least 3 clear days before all meetings of the council. Similarly, posters of meetings will be emailed to councillors by the Clerk and printed and displayed on council notice boards at least 3 clear days before all meetings.
10. Suitable member allowances (as agreed by council) for use of personal resources e.g., paper and printer ink will be reimbursed. A record of this will be maintained by the Clerk.
11. Other relevant information will be emailed to members in between meetings, as determined by the Clerk.
12. Contact details for all parish councillors and the Clerk together with meeting dates will be displayed on all parish notice boards.

Press Policy

The Parish Council is keen to develop a good rapport and work proactively with the media, whilst ensuring that confidentiality and consent are maintained at all times. The policy below will explain how the Council may work with the media to meet Council objectives (see "Purpose", above) in accordance with the legal requirements and restrictions that may apply.

Legal requirements and restrictions

1. This policy is subject to the Council's obligations which are set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018, the General Data Protection Regulations 2018, other legislation which may apply, and the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations. The Council's Financial Regulations and relevant Standing Orders referenced in this policy are available via the Council's publication scheme.
2. The Council cannot disclose confidential information or disclose information which is prohibited by law. The Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Council's Standing Orders, under contract or by common law. Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the Code of Conduct adopted by the Council, a copy of which is available via the Council's publication scheme.

Procedure for working with the media

This policy outlines the procedures and arrangements for working with the media (including the press) and what Councillors or the Clerk should do if approached by the media, or if they are involved in a situation that will attract media attention. The policy also covers the Parish Council's use of any Social Media platforms.

1. On receipt of a request from the press or other media for a statement, the person receiving the request (clerk or any councillor) will advise the body making the request that a statement will be considered and issued shortly.
2. On receipt of a request the journalist or other caller should be asked to make clear who they are working for and what is the exact nature of their enquiry. Further, they should be asked where any information they elicit will be published.
3. The Council is under no obligation to provide a statement.
4. Only the Clerk and/or the Chair shall provide the press with a verbal or written statement – ideally this statement would be after liaison with each other as a minimum and may involve input from other Councillors too.
5. The exception to (4.) above would be if the Chairman or the Parish Council at a Parish Council meeting had delegated authority to a specific parish cllr(s) to make the response on behalf of the Council.
6. Under no circumstances must anything of a confidential nature be disclosed to the press or other media.
7. The response to the press or other media should be the view of the Parish Council as a whole, not the view of an individual Cllr or the Clerk. However, an individual may give a direct quote as long as they attribute that quote to their name and make it clear that is their view and not that of the Parish Council.
8. No response should be made that is in any way damaging to the interests or reputation of the Parish Council.
9. The Parish Council acknowledges the right of the media to obtain information from the Parish Council under the Freedom of Information Act. The Council will respond to such requests in accordance with the Act as laid out in Ruyton XI Town Parish Council's Freedom of Information policy.

The Council will not release information that is exempted. Exemptions will be:

- (a) Personal data (see paragraph 10 below)
- (b) Confidential matters
- (c) Information likely to endanger the health or safety of a Cllr or Clerk or any other individual.

10. Data protection – The council recognises that personal data (including photographs relating to a Cllr or Clerk) are protected under the Data Protection Act 2018 and this personal data will not be disclosed to the media without the consent of the person concerned.
11. If a request for information involves a conflict of interest for a Cllr or the Clerk, the Cllr or Clerk must declare his or her interest and avoid involvement with the matter.
12. This Policy will be reviewed at least annually by Full Council.
13. The Clerk should keep a record of all communications with the Press or other media.

Meetings

1. A meeting of the Council and its committees is open to the public unless the meeting resolves to exclude them because their presence at the meeting is prejudicial to the public interest due to the confidential nature of the business, or other special reason(s) stated in the resolution. In accordance with the Council's Standing Orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting of the Council and its committees, if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.
2. Where a meeting of the Council and its committees include an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Council's Standing Orders.
3. The photographing, recording, filming, or other reporting of a meeting of the Council and its committees (which includes e.g. using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV/radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums, or social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) which enable a person not at the meeting to see, hear, or be given commentary about the meeting is permitted unless (i) the meeting has resolved to hold all or part of the meeting without the public present or (ii) such activities disrupt the proceedings or (iii) the following two paragraphs apply.
4. The photographing, recording, filming, or other reporting of a child or vulnerable adult at a Council or committee meeting is not permitted unless an adult responsible for them has given permission.
5. Oral reporting or commentary about a Council or committee meeting by a person who is present at the meeting is not permitted.
6. The Council shall, as far as it is practicable, provide reasonable facilities for anyone taking a report of a Council or committee meeting and for telephoning their report at their own expense.
7. The Council's Standing Orders will confirm if attendance by the public, their participation, photographing, recording, filming, or other reporting is permitted at a meeting of a sub-committee.

Social Media Policy

Ruyton XI Towns Parish Council realises that social media and networking websites have become a regular part of everyday life and that many people enjoy membership to sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Why might the Parish Council use social media?

The Parish Council's aim is to inform members of the community and the wider local area, through as many communication channels as possible, about what is happening within the Parish and local area and share important news and information. The Parish Council's Community Engagement Policy recognises that different demographics may be reached through careful use of social media.

Any official Parish Council social media channels supplement the information published on their website.

- The Parish Council can remind people of important events and alert followers instantly to breaking news.
- The Parish Council can link to interesting and useful information about the Parish and local area published by other people.
- The Parish Council can better communicate with those using mobile devices.

Sharing information via other organisations' social media accounts

If the Parish Council does not have any official social media accounts set up, it may ask the admins of local social media accounts e.g., Ruyton XI Towns Newsgroup, to share relevant Parish Council news with their followers. If the clerk and Chairman agree that it is appropriate to share information in this way, the guidelines relating to the use of official accounts (see below) will apply. Following discussion with the Chairman, the clerk shall have delegated authority to prepare content to be shared. In addition to this, any such posts **must**:

a) be preceded by the text: "Shared on behalf of Ruyton XI Towns Parish Council"

b) include the following text: Please note that the Parish Council is not able to monitor or respond to any comments on this post. If you have any comments or require further information, please contact the Parish Council Clerk directly at [email address], or [clerk phone number] (office hours only).

Use of Official Accounts

Ruyton XI Towns Parish Council may in the future decide to operate its own Facebook account and/or Twitter account for the promotion of activities and events and as a communication and broadcast tool. If it decides to do so, the following policies will apply.

Examples of acceptable corporate content are:

- Marketing campaigns
- Consultation documents
- News feed & emergency information
- Event listings
- Key dates
- Short debates & quick comments on hot topics and relevant news (discussion board)
- Polls and information gathering
- Useful links

The following outlines the limits of their use:

1. An official account on any social media website may only be set up with consent from the Parish Council.
2. Only staff and councillors with delegated authority may use these accounts to post online and access to the account is strictly limited. Any official Parish Council social media accounts will be monitored periodically by the duly authorised councillor or member of staff (see Social Media Moderation Policy below).
3. Only authorised councillors or staff are allowed to share links to the Council website, partner websites, 'Useful links' (e.g. local transport sites), links to other social media pages, local media e.g. Shropshire Star, National organisations, etc.
4. Only the Parish Clerk and the Councillor responsible for managing official Facebook and/or Twitter have permission to upload photos and videos. The appropriate permissions must be obtained for all imagery.
5. All information published on the internet must comply with the Parish Council's Data Protection (privacy) policies.
6. Social media accounts will primarily be used to promote 'good news' and information, supplementing content already published on the Parish Council's website.
7. Comments posted on and messages received on the Facebook page are views of individuals and do not represent the views of the Parish Council.
8. Anyone who would like to request for something to be posted on the Parish Council's social media platforms should contact the Parish Clerk.

9. Any employee, Councillor, or member of the public who becomes aware of social networking activity that would be deemed distasteful should make the Parish Clerk aware as soon as possible.
10. If the Parish Council follows another Facebook/Twitter account, this does not imply any kind of endorsement.
11. The Parish Council will not normally reply to direct messages on Facebook or Twitter (see Direct messages on social media networking platforms below). The Council, therefore, asks that in these instances contact is made with the Parish Council clerk using the contact form on the website, or direct email.
12. Any posts on official social media accounts should be:
 1. Timely and appropriate
 2. Mindful of the audience
 3. Accurate without any spelling mistakes or typos
 4. Factually correct and without personal opinion
 5. Concise and not designed to promote a discussion (with the exception of specific community engagement activity e.g., an opinion poll).
 6. In line with data protection

Social media moderation policy

Any official Parish Council social media pages will be reactively moderated. We cannot accept responsibility for the content of any comment.

We reserve the right to remove comments received on social media sites e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc that:

- Contain abusive, obscene, indecent, or offensive language, or link to obscene or offensive material
- Contain swear words or other sorts of profanity
- Are completely removed from the topic of conversation or are not relevant to the item posted on the wall
- Contain abusive language towards an individual involved in the thread, other organisations, or the page administrator
- Constitute spam or promote or advertise products, except where it is for an event, publication or similar item that has direct relevance to the subject of discussion. Information about locating and sharing knowledge and expertise is welcomed, but within the specific discussion
- Are designed to cause nuisance to the page administrator or other users

For serious and/or persistent breaches of the moderation policy, we reserve the right to prevent users from posting further comments.

Personal Accounts on Social Media

Staff must use social networking in a way that does not conflict with the terms of their contract of employment. The absence of, or lack of, explicit reference to a specific website or service does not limit the extent of the application of this policy. Where no policy or guidelines exist, employees should use their professional judgment and take the most prudent action possible. If the Parish Council is referred to in a way that is deemed defamatory or confidential information is disclosed, we reserve the right to report the comment and request that it be removed.

Councillors are at liberty to set up personal social media accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view. Councillors should be aware of the need to present a professional image and must not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary, or libellous nature should not be made, and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration, and colourful language.

Purdah

In the six-week run up to an election – local, general, or European – Councils must be very careful not to do or say anything that could be viewed in any way to support any political party or candidate. The period is known as purdah. The Parish Council will continue to publish important service announcements using any official social media accounts but will monitor and potentially remove responses if they are overtly party political.

Direct messages posted on social networking platforms

If appropriate, the Council will endeavour to respond as quickly as possible to all questions received via social media platforms. We do, however, still ask that all formal requests, comments, enquiries, or complaints be emailed to the Parish Council using the contact details on the website.

The Parish Council may monitor forums and blogs to gain indirect feedback. The Parish Council may post replies on forums or blogs to answer queries or address factual corrections but would generally take a cautious approach before getting involved in contentious issues.

The Parish Council reserves the right to take any necessary steps to protect members of the Parish community and will delete any comments referencing the Parish Council which are deemed abusive or offensive in anyway.

Any official Parish Council social media pages will be monitored **periodically**.