

CROWLE PARISH COUNCIL

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COMMUNICATIONS POLICY – ADOPTED 10TH SEPTEMBER 2020

1.0 Introduction

Crowle Parish 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.

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

2.0 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 an organisation, the less likely they are to rate it highly.

The Parish Council, through good communication, will understand and better meet the needs of the community whilst also raising the profile of the village and the Parish 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 Crowle as a destination
- attract businesses/employment to the village
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups
- 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 the Local Government Association, suggests that the most important drivers of council reputation among local residents are:

- perceived quality of services overall
- perceived value for money
- media coverage
- direct communications
- council performance
- a clean, green and safe environment
- positive experiences of contact with council employees

If the Council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve resident 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
- Wychavon District Councillors and staff
- Worcestershire County Councillors and staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people and the elderly
- The media
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- MPs
- Other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the area

2.4 How should we be communicating?

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

- The Council's website (Crowle Online)
- Council agenda papers/correspondence
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultation
- The Crowle Cryer monthly village newsletter

Ways in which communication could be improved:

- Improved visibility of the Council and its activities via the Crowle Cryer
- Make improvements to the "Crowle Online" website to make it more user friendly and accessible to people with specific needs
- Use of social media
- Regular consultation with the community and feedback to them on subsequent actions resulting from the consultation e.g. "You said this and We did that".
- Councillor "surgeries" in the Crowle Shop & Café or Parish Hall.

2.4.1 Press – managing the media

The media plays a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital.

The Communities and Local Government report found people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local media. Whilst good relationships already exist, there is always room for improvement.

All communication to the media by Councillors in their Crowle Parish Council role must be sent to the Parish Clerk and the Chairman of the Council for approval.

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 Parish Clerk and the Chairman
- Evaluate media coverage
- Issue timely and relevant press releases should the need arise
- Pre-empt potential stories arising from Council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR (where possible/necessary)
- Ensure all media contact is with the Parish Clerk or Chairman (or in their absence, the Vice Chairman) as per Standing Orders.

2.4.2 Online presence - Improve the council's website

The Crowle Online website is updated with Council Agendas, Minutes and other information as necessary. The Council will look at ways in which the website could be improved (or a new site created) to meet the new website accessibility regulations, provide wider village/parish information, include links to other agencies and develop a platform for local community groups to share their activities.

2.4.3 More frequent and effective use of social media

To investigate the use of social media, including Facebook and Twitter in order to promote the activities of the Council. If it is agreed that these are accepted methods of promotion of the Council's activities, then a social media policy will be needed together with an agreement as to by whom and when messages will be posted.

2.4.4 Better promotion of the Council's online presence

All communications should promote the Council's website and if appropriate its social media accounts.

It is important to ensure that links to our website are provided from other key partners, especially Wychavon DC and Worcestershire County Council

2.4.5 Public Consultation - carry out effective consultation

The Council needs to establish means by which consultations will take place to cover all aspects of life in Crowle so that a full understanding of the needs of the community is developed. A Council action plan can then be put together, which will be reviewed annually. This type of consultation shouldn't be repeated too often but perhaps at the beginning of each Council (i.e. every four 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 any new initiatives and funding bids.

Any consultation needs to be developed in such a way that there is an opportunity for all members of the community to engage in the process. Key elements of a consultation include:

- **Who** – develop an understanding of the demographics of the community
- **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’.

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 Parish Clerk

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

Written communication: all Councillors and the Parish Clerk are provided with a council 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.

When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk should be sought.

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

Elected members 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 Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- request an item on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having informed the Parish Clerk of their intentions.

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 Parish 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.

Any and all enquires by the media should be referred immediately to the Parish Clerk or Chairman of the Council.

3.0 Evaluation

It is extremely important that the Council measures the success of this strategy so that it may inform any future plans. A benchmark of the current state will be required.

What communication improvements can we measure?

- Media's assessment of Crowle Parish Council's communication coverage
- Raised awareness of the Parish Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes of all stakeholders towards Crowle Parish Council
- Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes
- Increased attendance at meetings and organised events.
- Copies of Crowle Cryer produced and advertising take up

How will we do this?

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys in the Crowle Cryer and feedback from Councillor surgeries.
 - Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content usage.
 - Hits on website.
 - Number of Likes and Followers on Social Networking sites (if applicable)
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This Policy was approved at a meeting of the Parish Council held on 10th September 2020