

Hassocks Parish Council
Public communications policy
Approved **Date** (minute ref)



Public Communications Policy

Scope

1. This policy applies to all councillors, staff or volunteers communicating externally on behalf of Hassocks Parish Council. This policy sets out the principles and obligations which must inform communications strategy and implementation. It does not set out details on the content of communications.

Legal context

2. This policy operates within the legal frameworks provided by:
 - The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960
 - The Local Government Acts 1972 and 1986
 - The Freedom of Information Act 2000
 - The Data Protection Act 1998 (and subsequent GDPR updates)
 - Hassock Parish Council's Standing Orders
 - Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014

General principles

3. Good communications with our community and partner organisations contribute to all aims in the business plan. However, they particularly contribute to the aim: *'To develop a culture of delivering services in partnership with community groups and volunteers and to engage with all sections of the community through a variety of appropriate and effective channels of communication.'*

4. Any public communications on behalf of The Council must clearly serve at least one of the following purposes:
 - Informing the public of, or encouraging participation in, the work, activities and responsibilities of the Parish Council, or of relevant District and County Councils. (*Purpose 1*).
 - Promoting public understanding of the social, civic, economic and ecological life of Hassocks, including sharing information on local social and civic events and organisations. (*Purpose 2*).
4. All communications should be inclusive, accessible, non-discriminatory and non-partisan. We will take particular care not to appear to endorse specific partisan, religious or business beliefs or interests. Particular care and caution will be taken during purdah (the six-week run up to an election).
5. Staff should monitor and regularly report to the Policy, Resources & Communications Committee on the effectiveness of Council communications. The Policy, Resources & Communications Committee should conduct an annual review of the communications strategy, and periodic reviews of this communications policy.

Style and attribution

6. Our preference in informal communications is to use the first-person plural – ‘We’. In formal communications we will use the third-person singular: ‘The Council said...’, ‘Hassocks Parish Council will...’ etc.
7. All communications with the public or media must reflect the corporate views and positions of The Council. Formal statements should be signed off by the Clerk, Chair or appropriate councillor, speaking on behalf of Council and agreed policy.
8. Quotes may be attributed to a ‘spokesperson for The Council’ or a specific named spokesperson.

Accessibility

9. We will use clear, plain language and accessible formats wherever practical, taking care that communications can be understood by people with different needs, including those using assistive technologies.
10. We will ensure that our website is regularly reviewed to ensure it meets best practice in accessibility standards.
11. We will always aim to include image description text and will avoid use of text heavy images where alternative text is not provided.

12. Where appropriate, we will make key information available through more than one channel or format and will respond reasonably to requests for alternative formats or communication support.

Prioritisation and proportionality

13. We prioritise communications serving purpose 1 over those serving purpose 2. Within purpose 1, we prioritise communications most directly related to the work of the Parish Council. Within purpose 2 we prioritise messages which are most positive and/or uncontroversial.
14. Particular care will be taken to ensure that minutes from meetings and other publicly reported information on Parish Council decisions, actions or deliberations, are appropriately shared.
15. We will ensure that staff time and other resources invested in communications efforts are proportionate the purpose they serve.
16. Where appropriate, we will restrict two-way communications on social media channels and/or redirect responses to alternative channels. This will be in cases where an informal response is not appropriate, or managing repeated informal responses is not proportionate.

Third party content

17. From time to time, we may share content from third parties on our communications channels – e.g. information about local events or volunteer activities. We will do so in a proportionate, non-discriminatory and consistent manner.
18. We will not share third party content which is:
19. Not strongly related to one of our two communications purposes.
20. Of a purely or predominantly commercial, partisan or religious/non-religious nature.
21. We may also restrict the sharing of third-party content where it is excessive, disproportionate or gives an inaccurate impression of endorsement.
22. We will follow local community groups, businesses, representatives, officials, organisations or media on social media when requested to do so, or when identified as a relevant stakeholder. Such following will not indicate endorsement or an expectation of sharing content.

23. Consistent with these principles we may include channel specific rules on third party content in the communications strategy.

Responsibilities

24. Substantive public communications are defined as:

- Issuing press releases or publishing news articles or reports
- Any communications expressing a new Council policy, preference or decision.
- Any communications where unusual public interest or controversy is foreseeable.

25. Substantive public communications will be issued by the office with the approval of the Chair of the relevant committee or working group, with notice provided to the Chair and Vice Chair of Council, and the Chair of the Policy, Resources & Communications Committee.

- Communications activities related to specific projects should be approved by the Councillor leading on that project.
- Approval will also be required from any councillors or Council representative mentioned by name or quoted in any communication.

26. Non-substantive or informal public communications are defined as:

- The repetition or resharing of previously approved communications content or messages.
- The sharing of third-party content (where consistent with this policy and the communications strategy).
- Generic uncontroversial messages consistent with the communications policy and strategy.
- Ongoing communications related to a specific project consistent with the approved project plan, and the communications policy and strategy.

27. Non-substantive or informal public communications will be issued by the Community Engagement Officer (or other staff member, volunteer or councillor designated by the Clerk) on behalf of The Council.

28. Access to communications channels should be restricted to those with a need and agreed purpose to use them. Access to communications channels should be periodically reviewed to ensure that outdated accesses are withdrawn, and security is maintained.

Channels

29. The Council will maintain such communications channels and maintain them to the extent as is deemed appropriate to achieve the aims of the communications policy and strategy. The communications strategy sets out: which channels are to be maintained and how, the purpose and expected content of specific channels –

including any expected third party content, who is expected to have managing responsibility for each channel and who is to oversee its use.

Other communications identifying members of the public

30. Where any public communication (whether by video, audio recordings, photography or written reference) identifies a specific member or members of the public, appropriate care will be taken to ensure they are informed of this, and where appropriate that their consent is obtained.

Use of personal social media

31. Councillors and staff are likely to have personal social media/network accounts. Personal accounts need to be used in a way that does not conflict with The Council's 'Code of Conduct' or terms of their contract of employment.
32. Councillors, volunteers and staff's use of personal social media/network accounts must clearly delineate personal views from those of The Council. They must not bring The Council into disrepute, reveal privileged internal communications or data, or purport to speak on behalf of The Council.
33. Personal email or social accounts (including WhatsApp or similar message platforms) must not be used for Council business. Official Council email addresses should be used for all correspondence to ensure transparency and compliance with Freedom of Information laws.

Video, audio recordings and photography

34. Representatives of The Council may only record video, audio or photography at meetings, events and activities in a manner consistent with the 'Video, audio recordings and photography policy'.
35. Occasionally, councillors, staff or volunteers may take personal video or audio recordings or photography of Council events or activities (or third-party events or activities at which The Council is represented). In doing so, they must clearly delineate themselves from any official Council authorised video, audio recordings or photography.
36. Councillors, volunteers and staff sharing personal (or non- Council authorised) video or audio recordings or photography of Council events or activities (or third-party events or activities at which The Council is represented) should clearly delineate these from official video, audio recordings or photography.
37. The Council may only externally publicise or share video or audio recordings or photography in a manner consistent with the 'Video, audio recordings and photography policy' and in furtherance with the purposes of this 'Public communications policy'.