

Ixworth & Ixworth Thorpe Parish Council

Communications and Media Policy

Purpose

This policy will provide guidance for how Ixworth & Ixworth Thorpe Parish Council engage with various forms of media, including social media. It will provide better opportunities to communicate with parishioners, the press and other interested parties while maintaining appropriate governance over statements made.

It is designed to complement other Parish Council policies including, but not limited to, the General Privacy Notice and the Code of Conduct. This policy also provides information and guidance to those wishing to communicate with the Parish Council, identifying official means of communication.

Scope

This policy covers all interaction with the media, and it will ensure any communications that reflect the opinion of the Parish Council are made through appropriate channels. It also provides guidance for all councillors, volunteers and Parish Council staff when making statements that are not approved.

All Parish Councillors, Council staff and volunteers are responsible for what they post in both a Council and personal capacity, due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council.

This policy applies to all communication including, but not limited to,

- Email
- Letters
- Social Networking sites
- Micro blogging sites
- Press
- Village newsletters

Parish Council Position

The Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Council. As such, all public communications should be agreed upon by the Council as a body and communicated in an agreed upon manner, most likely by the Clerk.

This policy does not seek to regulate Councillors in their private capacity. In accordance with the above, however, when a Councillor's view or position differs from that of the Council, they are required to make this clear. Any statements made without the agreement of the Council are done so in a member's private capacity and must be identified as such.

Any Officer or Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee to ensure that the principles outlined in Appendix 1, Legal Framework, are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

Contact with the media

Requests for information or comment from the Parish Council should be submitted through the Proper Officer for the Council, which is the Clerk. Email is the preferred method due to reliability and

a clear audit trail. Instant replies should not be expected and where there is urgency, the reasons for this should be stated.

The Clerk will then ensure information or direct enquiry is passed to Councillors as appropriate. When a response is required, the following principles should be adhered to.

- Statements made must reflect the Council's opinion
- Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is very clear that the opinions given were their own and not those of the Council
- Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. Such letters should be kept brief, balanced in tone
- Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee
- If individual Members choose to send letters to express their own opinions, it should always be made absolutely clear these are a personal view
- At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council, even when responding in a private capacity

Social Media

The Parish Council acknowledge the benefits of social media, including the ability to reach many people quickly, real time communication, the variety of media such as text, photos, video and the ability for parishioners to engage as they wish, commenting or not.

There are disadvantages to be acknowledged also, and all Councillors, staff and volunteers for the Parish Council must be conscious of these when engaging in social media on matters relating to the Parish Council.

- Information is shared in the public domain and it should be expected that it can be viewed by anyone in the world
- There is often no need to register to view content, so the information has little to no gatekeeping.
- Once published, it cannot be taken back. Expect anything published, even if later deleted, to be permanently online.
- The sharing nature of social media means it can easily spread beyond the intended audience
- There is no guarantee of truth. Gossip and misinformation exist in all methods of communication but are more easily spread online

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, volunteers, Council staff or residents should report them to the Clerk of the Council.

Standards of Behaviour

In addition to the Code of Conduct, the following standards should be used by all Councillors, staff members and volunteers engaged by the Parish Council.

- Be aware of your responsibilities as defined in this social media policy
- Remember you are responsible for the content you post on social media
- Never give out personal details, such as home address and telephone numbers. Contact details should only be given out when they are in the public domain and even then, it is best practice to exchange such contact details outside public social media channels.
- Know your obligations.

- You must comply with other Council policies when using social media.
- Show respect to all. Be respectful of the authority, employees and other members of the Council.
- Be aware that social media networks are rapidly growing in popularity and are used by all ages in society
- Always remain aware of web security and ensure you use a security program and ensure you use a secure password and keep your computer or other hardware secure from viruses
- Ensure that any mobile device you use to access social media is also secure to avoid others using your device to post under your own name
- Do not get involved in an argument online, neither party tends to come off well. Limited space and a short time frame in which to phrase a response can inflame a situation.
- Beware of those individuals who purposefully start and perpetuate an argument.

Personal accounts

Use a disclaimer.

When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Council. Make it clear that what you say is your personal views only.

Parish Council Social Media

The Parish Council website remains the main method of communication and the use of social media is designed to augment, and not replace, existing methods of communication. The Parish Clerk is the designated administrator of any social media account in the Parish Council's name, and none will be opened without their approval.

The Parish Council reserves the right to restrict or remove any content on the Parish Council social media platform that is deemed in violation of the social media policy or applicable law. Users are hereby informed that their posts may not be published/or may be deleted if they meet any of the criteria below:

- Comments not topical to the article being discussed
- Comments that are politically motivated
- Profane language
- Material that perpetuates discrimination of protected characteristics as listed in the Equality Act 2010, including age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnerships, pregnancy and maternity
- Solicitation of commerce i.e., Trying to sell items or encourage the sale of products or services not related to the Council
- Illegal conduct or encouragement/support of illegal activities
- Information that compromises or may compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems
- Content that violates the legal ownership interest of any other party

To protect its staff, Ixworth & Ixworth Thorpe Parish Council reserve the right to limit any individual account's access to official media channels if their conduct is felt to be harmful, harassing, bullying or otherwise in violation of the Council's abuse policy. Users may also be reported to the appropriate social media company for review.

Impact on the Council's post will be monitored, so far as each platform allows, e.g., to ascertain the number of reposts stimulated to assist in measuring engagement.

Appendix 1 – Legal Framework

The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy:

- “Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims [and the provision of services] should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both.”
- “Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council should be handled with particular care. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although councils should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments.”
- “Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.”
- “Local authorities should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”