



HOUGHTON REGIS TOWN COUNCIL

Communication Policy & Communication Strategy

Date of Approval:	3 rd December 2014
Date of Review:	12 th June 2017
Date of Re approval:	9 th October 2017

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1. Introduction

Houghton Regis Town Council has an aspiration to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees, councillors and stakeholders.

The Council is responsible for the delivery of local services to those living in the in the parish of Houghton Regis*. Effective communication is key to providing responsive services that meet the local need.

Communication is a complex, multi-dimensional topic and needs to embody a variety of communication methods to enable communications to reach out as widely as possible.

The Communications Policy will set out how Houghton Regis Town Council currently communicates and the Communication Strategy will set out how the Council can develop its communications.

An important part of any organisation's role is to ensure that information provided both by and to it is easily accessible, relevant and timely. The Council has to recognise the importance of communication and be committed to developing its own services to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

*Where Houghton Regis is referred to reference should be made to the Parish of Houghton Regis which encompasses the town of Houghton Regis, and the rural settlements of Thorn and Sewell

2. The Benefits of Good Communication

Engaging communities in the work of the Council has many benefits. Good quality engagement will increase people's understanding of the services the Council provides, so that those who need our services can access them. It will also improve customer satisfaction with the Council, by ensuring that services meet the needs of citizens and enabling individuals to help shape the decisions that affect them.

3. Who is our Community?

Our community includes:

- Residents and prospective residents
- Those working-in and visiting Houghton Regis
- Businesses and prospective businesses
- Voluntary organisations and groups
- Stakeholders, partners and other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)
- Central government and government offices.
- The local, regional and trade media (press, radio and television).
- Town and unitary councillors and employees.

4. Communication Policy - Vision & Aims

Our Communication Vision is that our community will:

- Know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect from us;
- Feel confident and satisfied with our services, and their costs;
- Understand how to get involved with, or influence, our work.

The Council's Aims are to seek to ensure that communications are:

- Relevant and appropriate;
- Honest, open and accurate;
- Accessible to all members of the community;
- Clear, simple and user-friendly;
- Timely and current;
- Up to date and relevant;
- Legitimate in accordance with relevant legislation, national codes of practice and with the Council's own protocols and guidelines;
- Cost-effective.

Through doing so the following outcomes are intended:

- Raised community satisfaction, trust and confidence levels;
- Raised community awareness of services provided by the Council;
- Raised profile of the Council.

The Council will also ensure that all communication activity takes into account the differing accessibility needs of all, regardless of culture or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, gender, disability, age, sexuality, geographical location or any other status.

The Council's approach will be sensitive to the needs, values, language and cultural differences that exist within its communities and will make communication materials available in other formats where reasonable and appropriate.

5. Overarching Communication Principles Statement

We will be polite and courteous at all times;

We will use plain language avoiding jargon or words that are not in everyday use;

We will listen carefully to what the community has to say;

We will respect your right to privacy, confidentiality and safety.

Contact by letter or email or social media

We will try to reply to you within 3 working days of receipt.

If we can't give you a full reply within 3 working days, we will send an

acknowledgement stating the timescale for reply, explaining who is dealing with the matter and giving you details of how to contact them.

Contact by telephone

We will try to answer the telephone within 15 seconds (or six rings);

We will tell you who you are talking to and ask how we can help;

We will take ownership of any calls that we answer. If you have called the wrong extension number, we will take your details and pass them on to the right person who can help;

We will return your telephone call as soon as we are able and will always try and acknowledge telephone calls within one working day.

6. Current Communication Methods

The Council employs a range of different communication media for internal and external communications. Currently, the principal means of communication are:

(a) External Communications

Printed media:

- **Press Statements, Media Releases and Features**

Some Council employees have a press office function, producing responses to media enquiries and proactive releases to publicise council events. Council may also direct press releases on Council decisions and projects through the council meeting process.

- **Town Crier**

The Town Crier is a quarterly resident's newsletter that provides information and features about the council and its services, civic and democratic details, current consultations, community events, grants and developments, local business, updates on forthcoming strategic developments, crime and anti social behaviour and environmental matters.

- **Town Guide**

This is produced every 2 years and contains articles on recent and forthcoming strategic developments and a wealth of community information and advice.

- **Event Programmes**

Produced specially to promote events these can often include other pieces of information and advice relevant to Houghton Regis.

- **Other**

These include the Council's Annual Report reflecting on the past year and looking forward to the next year and the Council's Vision which sets out the Council's priorities.

Electronic media:

- **Website**

The Council's website – www.houghtonregis.org.uk– contains information on the Council and its services, other local services as well as latest news and events. Copies of the Town Crier and the Town Guide are also available on the website. It also allows people to contact the council with their enquiries, suggestions and complaints. The website is also where we post details of Council meetings, agendas and minutes.

- **Social Media – to including the sharing of other community events.**

(b) Internal Communications

Employees:

As a small council internal communications centre around:

Face to face meetings / briefings as required;

Emails

Regular senior officers meetings (fortnightly);

Regular full staff meetings (every 2 months);

Council documentation is stored on a shared drive accessible to all staff.

Councillors:

Staff communication to councillors includes:

Weekly newsletter sent electronically where possible and by post otherwise includes draft minutes, mayoral diary, forthcoming events, other opportunities / information;

Staff available to meet with Councillors, where available;

Leaders briefing meetings are held fortnightly on average (dependent on availability);

Council and committee meetings (publicly accessible);

Members briefings as required to brief and update members on a specific topic (not accessible by members of the public).

7. Communication Strategy

Improvement to communications:

- All staff and councillors to think about the messages they need to communicate and the opportunities to showcase success and good practice;
- Through Council and committee meetings councillors to consider issuing instructions for press releases;
- Through Council and committee meetings councillors to consider issuing instructions for public consultation;
- To investigate options on the website for electronic newsletters such as business, community, environment, strategic updates etc;
- To investigate options on the website for a consultation portal;
- Add a Press section to the existing website which would include media releases, information and a selection of photographic material for journalists use;
- Undertake councillor and staff training in dealing with the press / media.

In addition the council will seek to:

Introduce new ways for Council information to be distributed including the use of social media, including Facebook and LinkedIn (see Appendix C for social media benefits); DONE

To have a Town Council presence at community events i.e. stall with Town Council information, roller banners with promotional detail on; DONE

Develop a Business email group to encourage business participation in the local community and to disseminate information and updates;

Maintain a strong and recognisable council identity to promote a professional image and ensure that the Council identity is consistently used in public facing communications;

Create a Communications Calendar to highlight the activities the council is involved in and any associated communications activity for each month for the year ahead;

Ensure that staff have a broad understanding of the council and its services as a whole by circulating draft minutes and senior officer and leaders briefing notes..

8. EVALUATION

In order that communities know about the services that we offer and for us to ensure that those services meet – and continue to meet – the needs of local people, we need to adopt a proactive approach to communication and keep under constant review the means by which we communicate.

What can we measure?

- Raised awareness of the Town Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes towards HRTC
- Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes

How will we do this?

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys
- Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content usage
- Hits on website
- Number of Friends and Followers on Social Networking sites (if applicable)

9. REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed every 4 years or as required by the Corporate Services Committee.

APPENDIX A

Managing the media effectively to promote and defend the council

This strategy, should be read in conjunction with the Press / Media Policy. Appendix B.

Our key points for effective management of media relations are to:

- ◆ Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time (maximum 4 hours)
- ◆ Be helpful, polite and positive
- ◆ Never say “no comment”
- ◆ Ensure any statements to hostile enquiries are cleared by the most appropriate person and keep written records of responses to journalists
- ◆ Monitor response times to media enquiries and evaluate media coverage
- ◆ Ensure the appropriate council spokesman is fully briefed and available for interview if required
- ◆ Issue timely and relevant press releases using the brand template
- ◆ Pre-empt potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR
- ◆ Organise Media training for key speakers (Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Town Clerk and Senior Officers)

APPENDIX B

Press Protocols

Introduction

This document has been prepared as a guidance note for officers and elected members. It represents the policy of the Council in respect of its relationships with the Press and Media. The policy has been prepared to ensure consistency in the Council's dealing with the Media and details who is authorised to speak on behalf of the Council. It has been drafted to ensure that the views and policy of the Council are presented accurately.

The overriding principle of this policy is that all elements of the Media will be treated equally.

The Town Clerk and Officers of the Council

The Town Clerk as the Proper Officer of the Council is authorised to receive all communications from the Press and Media and to issue Press Statements on behalf of the Council as instructed by Committee or as the Officer may consider appropriate. All communications made by the Town Clerk will relate to the stated business, day to day management of its activities or adopted policy of the Council. The Town Clerk is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council. Where such questions are put to the Town Clerk the enquirer should be referred to all of the Group Leaders on the Council, the Chair of a Committee or the Town Mayor as considered appropriate.

In the absence of the Town Clerk media communications will handled by authorised Senior Officers. In the absence of these officers enquirers will be referred to the Town Mayor or Deputy Town Mayor who will act as the Town Clerk for the purposes of this element of the policy.

In relation to mayoral activities or council events the Communications & Promotions Officer may respond to queries from the media and may issue press releases.

No other officer of the Council apart from the above, or whom may be authorised by the Town Clerk, is authorised to speak or communicate with the Media on any matter affecting the Council or its business.

[Note: 1. This requirement will not prevent any officer contacting the Media in the capacity of an elected Union representative, or individually if in dispute with the Council.]

Note2: Town Council officers are expected to consult senior members (normally Committee Chairs) on any Press matter concerning the key current initiatives or objectives of the Council. There will be an expectation of consultation with senior members on matters of above-average public concern, an in anticipation of Press enquiry where that is appropriate.]

Members of the Council

When speaking or providing written material to the Media Members should make it clear in what capacity they are providing information or, are responding to the enquiry or interview. For example:

- As Group Leader
- As Chair of Committee
- As Town Mayor
- As individual (i.e. letter to press for publication)
- As spokesperson or as Press Officer for a political party

A copy of any written material provided by a Member, as representing the Council, to the media shall be forwarded on to the Town Clerk

Meetings of Council and Committees

Copies of Agenda and Minutes sent to Members for meetings of the Council or its Committees will be posted to the Media, without charge, at the same time.

Facilities will be provided at meetings for the Press to take notes of the proceedings.

As provided in the Council's Standing Orders both the Press and Public may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion.

[Note: The Town Council as a Parish Council is governed by the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act, 1960. The provisions of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985, which gave greater public access to the proceedings of local authorities, does not apply to Parish Councils. However, in adopting the policy contained in this document the Town Council has included parts of the revised procedures]

Communicating Decisions of the Council to the Media

The Town Clerk will, in consultation with the Chair of the relevant Committee and the Chairman of the Council, communicate decisions of the Council to the media only when specifically requested to do so at the meeting.

APPENDIX C

Social Networking

Social Networking is now a credible communication channel that is increasingly utilised by organisations, as well as individuals, as a means of developing online communities for gathering and disseminating information that is of mutual interest.

Many Public Sector bodies have their own Social Networking sites. The most popular are Facebook and Twitter, Facebook currently being the larger of the two with over 18 million users in the UK although Twitter's popularity is rapidly rising.

Social Networking sites offer value for money and a strong community focus. Running the sites utilises existing ITC systems and is therefore effectively free to set up and update.

Launching our own Town Council pages would provide an effective real time, two-way communication channel. It will allow us to engage with online groups that may not normally interact willingly with the Council. It will also help provide more people with access to Council services and allow the Council to engage with new audiences such as the under 25's, and will bridge the gap taking the Council to the place where people already are.

There will be certain communities that the Council has previously struggled to communicate to consistently that will already be using Facebook and/or Twitter.

It is a fast, efficient way of communicating as there are no lead-in production times for print or production – you can have a message up and available for viewing by your fans/followers in minutes.

At the same time it positions the Town Council as a modern council and helps us to change perceptions of remoteness by allowing us into the user's own space. More people will be tempted to engage with us because it does not involve attending a meeting, or even using very much of their time.

Social Networking sites will provide the opportunity to communicate with people immediately, in real time. This will, of course, bring its own challenge in that to be truly valued by Friends/Followers there must be a regular flow of messages and content that will encourage regular interaction. We will also need to ensure that we regularly monitor our pages so that we can address any specific questions or issues that arise.