

PETERCHURCH PARISH COUNCIL  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

## 1. Introduction

Peterchurch Parish Council is clear in its determination to communicate, consult and engage more effectively throughout the parish. 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.

Current communications include the website and a bi-annual newsletter and the Chairman's annual report.

The Parish Council recognises that It is critical that communications is 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. 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. The advantages of effective and regular communication are to:

- Better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities to meet those needs.
- Raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about the priorities of the Council.
- Make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people and the elderly,

### 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 MORI, and independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, suggests that the most important drivers of Parish Council reputation among local residents are:

- Perceived quality of services overall
- Perceived value for money
- Direct communications
- Council performance
- A clean and safe environment
- Positive experiences of contact with the Parish Clerk

If the Council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer 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
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- Other local organisations (police etc)
- Stakeholders such as the Ward Councillor, Herefordshire Council and Balfour Beatty

### 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 e.g. leaflets – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

Currently communication is achieved through:

- The Council's website
- Parish Council agenda papers/correspondence
- Biannual newsletter
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultation

If there are areas where communication could be improved (see below) this could form an action plan through which all necessary changes could be delivered:

- Improved visibility of the Council and its activities by more frequent reporting
- Inviting residents to be actively involved in Council meetings during the time set aside for public discussion
- Improve relations by Councillors taking up places on community groups and organisations
- Continue to improve the Council's website to make it more user.
- Use of social media
- Better promotion of the Council's online presence
- Regular consultation with the community and feedback to them on subsequent analysis including actions resulting from the consultation.

#### 2.5 - Communication during Parish Council meetings

The monthly Parish Council provide the most effective and regular means to communicate effectively with the community. The Parish Council must review and adapt as necessary the effectiveness of their meetings in capturing and responding to issues raised during the open session. It is key that the open session is "fit for purpose".

#### 2.6 - Online presence – improve the council's website

The council's website is regularly updated and is as much as possible kept up to date. It is important to work out strategies for keeping the website up-to-date and for ensuring good links with local businesses and community groups. As an example, the Parish Council website could include a short personal statement from each Councillor accompanied by a photograph.

#### 2.7 - 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.

#### 2.8 - Better promotion of the council's online presence

All communications should promote the Council's website. It is important to ensure that links to our website are provided from other key partners, especially Herefordshire Council.

#### 2.9 - Public Consultation – carry out regular and effective consultation

The Council needs to establish means by which consultation will take place to cover all aspects of life in Peterchurch so that a full understanding of the needs of the community is developed. An action plan and Council priorities can then be developed, which will be reviewed annually. The in-depth consultation will be repeated every five years but specific and tailored consultations will be required on an ad-hoc basis. 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 initiatives and funding bids. In addition, regular annual) consultation should be undertaken by Councillors to gather public opinion on perception and satisfaction of the Council and the work it does. The results of this consultation would also help to better understand the Council's strengths and weaknesses and would help the Council to measure the effectiveness of its work in general and this framework specifically.

The consultations need to be developed in such a way that there is an opportunity for all members of the community to engage in the process. Therefore, an analysis of the format of this consultation needs to be undertaken including:

- Who – develop an understanding of the demographics of the community and
- 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'

Once completed, strategies for delivering services and improvements where identified should be developed with annual consultations held to measure effectiveness of the Council's activities and reputation and a review of the in-depth consultation every five years.

## 2.10 - 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. The Clerk and Councillors are ambassadors of the Council and must remember this in all communications.

## 2.11 - Parish Clerk

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

The Parish Clerk has been provided with a council email address which is [peterchurchclerk@gmail.com](mailto:peterchurchclerk@gmail.com) to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business. A 'signature' is included 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 will be sought.

The Clerk will be required to communicate on a regular basis with the community as part of their duties. It is imperative that the Clerk handles all such communication with courtesy and professionalism at all times.

## 2.12- Councillors

Councillors 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 sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk

All communication must be responded to and the correspondent kept apprised of progress. The procedure for doing so is as follows:

- Having received an enquiry/complaint, the Councillor should acknowledge receipt (in writing) and advise of what action is intended to be taken
- Advise when that action has been taken and what to expect next (i.e. a response is now awaited from (a third party))
- 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 and all communication with the public on Council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of the Council regardless of the Councillor's own views on the subject. Any and all enquires by the media should be referred immediately to the Parish Clerk or Chairman of the Parish Council.

### **3 – Evaluation/Self Appraisal**

It is extremely important that the Council measures the success of this framework so that it may inform any future plan. A benchmark of the current state will be required and perhaps this could be achieved through a survey of the community (see Section 3.2) and other partners such as Herefordshire Council, Balfour Beatty and the Ward Councillor. Also, an independent review by an organisation such as the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils might be worth considering.

#### **3.1 - What communication improvements can we measure?**

- Raised awareness of the Parish Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes of all stakeholders towards Peterchurch Parish Council
- Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes
- Increased attendance at public meeting and organized events.

#### **3.2 - How will we do this?**

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys