

MELLOR PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

INTRODUCTION

Mellor Parish Council (MPC) provides information to local residents and the wider community through a variety of means: The parish website; village notice boards; hard copy newsletters; direct contact with councillors; occasional village meetings and by having regular public meetings. It also encourages the local community to engage with the parish council by attending the public meetings and by emailing the Clerk or by contacting one of the 10 elected councillors.

MPC has appointed a ***“Communications Working Party”*** to manage the communications strategy ***on behalf of MPC*** and enact parts of it whilst looking at ways to enhance the existing methods of communication and, going forward, engage more fully with the local community. The aim is to use a variety of established methods and media platforms to provide timely information about: the role of the Council; upcoming events; local services; Borough or County Councils decisions affecting the community and important updates on relevant matters affecting the parish and its residents.

MPC will also strive to provide both the public and all interested parties with simple lines of communication with the Council, the Clerk and elected Councillors. This will enhance the decision making process by allowing councillors to analyse information received from a variety of sources including (but not limited to) MCA, Lancashire County Council; Ribble Valley Borough Council; LALC; NALC; other Parish Councils; local news; the Police; the residents; local businesses and partners; local clubs and societies and therefore formulate policy based upon the genuine wishes of local people wherever a proven benefit is established.

INTERNAL & EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION – A TWO-WAY TRANSPARENT PROCESS

Effective two-way communication will enable MPC to:

- better understand the needs of the community
- develop appropriate strategies to benefit the parish
- use the precept to best advantage understanding the need to provide value for money
- concentrate on the community as a whole, not individual ages or groups
- raise residents’ satisfaction, trust and confidence in the PC
- openly discuss issues in a timely manner and act upon the feelings of the community
- give help and advice in support of local services, clubs and societies
- be an effective voice of the community
- campaign for better local services and challenge any attempt to cut local services
- make selective use of technology to engage with “hard-to-reach” groups such as young people
- promote the achievements of the council
- provide regular updates on local news, campaigns
- challenge negative views which might undermine the image or integrity of MPC or the parish

Communication with parishioners and other interested parties comes from:

PARISH CLERK

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

The Parish Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business. The Clerk's duties require both oral and written communication with the community on a regular basis. These communications need to be conducted with courtesy and professionalism at all times.

Items to be handled by the Clerk include:

- All official correspondence in the name of the MPC (using council letter headed paper).
- Correspondence entered into with an individual (for example in response to an enquiry made by that individual)
- Responses to unsolicited enquiries to MPC from 3rd parties (for example the Press)
- Correspondence initiated by MPC to an individual
- Correspondence to or from other Public Bodies, Advisory Bodies, Membership Organisation, Insurance, Legal and Financial institutions and all other Business Correspondence. (this list is not exhaustive)
- The MPC website (Easywebsites). All proposed postings on the website must be submitted to the Clerk for approval.
- Public Notices

COUNCILLORS

Elected members **may be approached** by members of the community with concerns, complaints, observations, ideas and questions. Indeed this contact with the public is an essential part of a councillors' role. Councillors need to be sensitive in their dealings with the public and others as this will reflect on MPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or by email (***in the case of email it must be copied immediately to the Clerk***). Councillors must avoid making any promises to any member of the public about any matter raised with them. However, Councillors may deal with the matter in the following ways:

- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk, including the wording of any response which must come from the Clerk (on MPC letter-headed paper)
- give factual information pointing out the relevant minutes on the Parish website
- refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- ask the Parish Clerk to place an item on the agenda to discuss the matter

If a councillor is in doubt as to how to respond to any enquiry, then the "golden rule" should be to seek guidance from the Clerk.

GUIDANCE ON COUNCILLOR INTERACTION:

- Councillors should always disclose their identity and membership of the parish council;
- All media enquiries should be directed to the Parish Clerk or the Chair in the first instance (who will advise the Chair of the Communication Working Group). The response may be delegated to another councillor with particular knowledge of an issue, keeping the Clerk and Chair updated.

- All media comment must accurately reflect MPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of MPC recorded in the minutes of open meetings can be quoted and made available to the media.
- The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able speak with some authority, using plain English.
- Councillors **should never make 'personal comments'** which could injure the reputation of MPC or negatively impact on the credibility of the council or members of the community.
- No comment should be made on any on matter which is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings. Should this be the case then advice must be sought from MPC's solicitor before any response is made.
- On the rare occasion that Councillors wish to make a 'personal statement', they must make clear:
 - o that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of MPC;
 - o that other councillors may hold a different view;
 - o that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by MPC.

COUNCIL MEETINGS

MPC meets on the first Thursday of every month except January and August. Meetings start at 7:00pm. The agenda allows any member of the public to bring forward ideas and/or make representations to the Council in a Public Session towards the beginning of the meeting. A maximum time limit of 5 minutes is allowed per individual; however the Chairman has discretion on the time allowed.

The Clerk produces draft minutes normally within 7 days of the meeting. These are then circulated to all councillors for review. The minutes are finalized at the next committee meeting, and the approved version, incorporating any amendments (as per Standing Orders) is then published on the MPC website.

OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

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 reviewed over time in order to communicate effectively with everyone.

Information technology offers new ways of communicating but comes with a number of risks and concerns. At the same time many people still rely on the tried and tested traditional methods – newsletters, leaflets, posters, fliers, and notices etc. which still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

MPC's general communication strategy **is overseen by the Community Working Party** working together with the Clerk. Overall control of communication strategy rests with the Council.

Forms of communication include:

- Quarterly Newsletter
- Posts on the parish website
- Posters on noticeboards
- Fliers
- Press releases
- Public meetings
- Special Village/Open meetings (including face to face)

The CWP will continue to explore ways in which communication could be enhanced.

COMMUNICATION - GOOD PRACTICE

It is important that:

- all communication from MPC is appropriate, timely, of interest to the local community, professional and reflects the decisions and policies of council
- both the Clerk and councillors communicating on behalf of MPC need to be aware that all communication(s) reflect(s) on the reputation of MPC in the community

Communication must:

- have a defined purpose;
- be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, defamatory, abusive, threatening, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- not unwittingly or knowingly contain content subject to copyright obtained from elsewhere unless it has been used with the express permission of the copyright owner;
- not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details. In the case of official business, be referred to the Chair or the Clerk prior to release;
- social media must not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

Equally, MPC expects that all incoming communications will meet the above criteria. MPC will not respond to any communication that does not meet the above standards.

PRESS – MEDIA MANAGEMENT

MPC's general policy for dealing with the press/media is as follows:

Where practicable any releases to the press or other media are to be approved by the Council. However, where time constraints make this approach impossible, then the Clerk and/or the Chairman/Vice Chairman are authorised to deal with the press/media on behalf of the Council.

Key points to bear in mind for effective management of media relations:

- Seek to respond to journalists within a reasonable time
- Be helpful, polite and positive and where possible avoid saying 'no comment' as this is always viewed as a reason to delve deeper
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Parish Clerk, Chairman or Vice Chairman (in the absence of the Chairman)
- Be pro-active, which includes issuing timely and relevant press releases and pre-empting potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes where possible

VILLAGE NOTICE BOARDS

The Parish Clerk will manage all posting of notices to the locked notice boards. These will be updated by the Clerk to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information. The number and location of noticeboards will be kept under review by the Communications Working Party together with the Clerk.

ONLINE PRESENCE

MPC operates a council owned website - <https://www.mellorparishcouncil.org.uk/> and the Clerk can be contacted on - clerk@mellorparishcouncil.org.uk.

The website provides key information about the Parish Council, Councillors, Meetings, Agendas, Finance, News, Notices, Policies, and Minutes etc.

Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.

MPC's website will be kept up-to-date by the Clerk but there is no obstacle to Working Parties and Councillors submitting copy/articles for inclusion on the website.

All communications should, where possible, promote the council website and it is important to ensure that links to the website are provided from other key partners, including RVBC and LCC.

PUBLICATIONS

MPC Newsletter

The Newsletter is a quarterly publication produced by the Parish Council as part of its overall policy of providing residents of the parish with interesting news articles, information and details of upcoming events as well as details of local clubs and societies, on-going campaigns and any other information which the parish council wishes to include. The Newsletter is delivered by hand to all households in the parish.

In between editions of the Newsletter, the PC relies on the online communications routes, as well as dedicated communications relating to special events.

PUBLISHING OF PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRIVACY ISSUES

The Communications Working Party, Clerk and Councillors using the various methods of communication outlined above will naturally seek to enhance narrative content with appropriate photographs and other images.

It is vital however that where photographs are taken at events, particularly those involving local schools and children, that images are not published without the permission of those featured or their parent(s)/guardian(s). Clearance of such images must be sought, e.g. via the school(s) involved, before they are published. Such clearance can be obtained either by a Councillor direct, or via the Clerk, who should be consulted if in doubt.

EMAIL

MPC councillor emails should be considered to be in the public domain. Councillors should ask themselves before they send anything related to their role on the MPC "Would I be happy if this was posted on the MPC Notice Board?"

GOOD PRACTICE AND GUIDANCE AROUND USE OF EMAIL

Councillors are asked to note the following guidance:

Use of email in discussing Council positions on issues.

A core governance rule for all PCs is that decisions should as far as possible be taken in public, including any related debates. Councillors should try to refrain from sending views on topics round to other Councillors (individually or in small groups) before discussion on topics at public meetings to ensure the transparency of the MPC's decision making process.

Rather than bring up a new issue to all MPC colleagues, Councillors should write to the Clerk (optionally with copy to the Chair), or to the Chair of the relevant sub-committee/working party) who will then decide how to take it forward.

The Clerk will make it clear in emails if a matter is for information only or whether a response is required. Councillors should refrain from passing comment by email of information-only items as it creates unnecessary email traffic. Where a response is required from the Clerk, councillors are advised to consider whether it is necessary to copy colleagues in to the response as colleagues do not want to have large numbers of unnecessary emails in their inboxes.

Transmission of personal data via email.

At the current time, MPC's Standing Orders do not include policies governing the disclosure of confidential information or personal data without legal justification.

Although it happens only infrequently, email correspondence between members may, from time to time, include personal data and even sensitive personal data, which needs to be handled carefully. This can arise, for instance, in employment-related and complaints correspondence and similar. The key guidance in writing emails in such situation is:

- Be careful when writing communications that include personal data, both in terms of what is said and how it is said. If in doubt, ask yourself whether you (or the PC) would feel embarrassed about your email being made public.
- Where the communication includes sensitive personal data, be extremely careful about who the email is addressed to, and err on the side of minimal circulation.
- If in doubt, consult the Clerk.

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS NOT CONTROLLED BY MPC

Councillors must be aware that all statements or opinions expressed by them, via any platform to either open or closed groups of individuals and/or the public at large which differ from the decisions and policies of MPC (regardless of the councillor's individual views on the subject) should be very carefully considered since they could be perceived as coming from MPC. Therefore, any views expressed by Councillors relating in any way to MPC should be avoided.