REPORT PC26129b Amended Communications Policy
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1. **BACKGROUND**
   The Council's current Communications Policy was adopted in January 2023 and had been due for review in September 2024. It references other documents, including a General Data Protection Policy, which has since been superseded. It is a policy that necessarily references technologies and media that are constantly evolving. For those reasons, as well as standard review periods, this review was necessary.

2. **SUMMARY**
   The Communications and Community Engagement Working Group has led on this policy's review. The working group has reviewed several other parish council's comparable policies as well as templates provided by various organisations. The initial draft of this revised policy was supplied by the Clerk, having carried out similar reviews of other policies.

   The policy attached is the one reviewed and recommended by the CCE Working Group.

3. **RECOMMENDATION**
   That Council resolves to adopt the revised Communications Policy.

Contents

1. Introduction 1
1.1 Overview 1
1.2 Purpose 2
1.3 Core Communication Channels 2
2. Governance and Conduct 3
2.1 Legal Framework 3
2.2 Authority to speak on behalf of the Council 3
2.3 General conduct 4
2.4 Media relations 4
2.5 Internal communications 5
2.6 Information governance 5
2.7 Crisis communications 5
2.8 Financial Compliance 5
3. Parish Council Website 5
3.1 Purpose 6
3.2 Accessibility Compliance 6
4. Parish Newsletter 6
4.1 Purpose 6
4.2 Production Process 6
4.3 Requirements 7
4.5 Advertising 7
5. Council Noticeboards 8
6. Social Media 8
6.1 Purpose 8
6.3 Moderation 8
6.4 Removal of Content 8
6.5 Protection of Other Users & Councillors & Officers 9
7. Pre-Election Periods 9
8. Parish Council Email 9

8.1 General Principles 9
8.2 Councillors 9
9. Mobile Devices 10
9.1 Personal Devices 10
9.2 Council Devices 10
9.3 Reporting security incidents 10
10. Use of Images and Digital Media 10
10.1 General principles 11
10.2 Children and Young People 11
10.3 Storage of Images 11
11. What To Do in the Event of an Error 11

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This policy provides guidance to Councillors and Officers of Laverstock and Ford Parish Council, setting out clear guidelines regarding communication activities and the appropriate use of the Council's communication channels.

Councillors and staff are responsible for complying with this policy and for ensuring it is consistently applied to protect the privacy, confidentiality, reputation, and interests of the Parish Council.

The Council's communications activities aim to:

- Promote transparency, understanding and public awareness of the Council's role, services and decision-making.
- Raise awareness of services, projects, events and opportunities provided by the Council.
- Support Councillors in their role as community leaders.
- Ensure information is readily accessible to all residents, including hard-to-reach groups and those who are digitally excluded.
- Proactively address inaccuracies or misrepresentations that may undermine the Council's integrity.
- Work with local organisations and partners to support community engagement and participation.

1.2 Purpose

The Parish Council recognises its responsibility to help communicate accurate, relevant, and timely information to partner organisations and the public in a professional, lawful and politically neutral manner.

The Parish Council will actively engage two-way communications to:

- Provide residents with clear and accurate information about Council activities and decisions.
- Collect feedback from residents and stakeholders to assist informed decision-making.
- Promote confidence in local democracy and public participation.

1.3 Core Communication Channels

The Council communicates through:

- Public meetings
- Community engagement activities
- Parish newsletter
- Parish Council Website
- Email Correspondence
- Social media
- Noticeboards
- Press releases and media engagement

2. Governance and Conduct

2.1 Legal Framework

All Council communications must comply with relevant legislation and guidance including, but not limited to:

- Local Government Act 1972
- Local Government Act 1986
- Localism Act 2011
- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Environmental Information Regulations 2004
- Data Protection Act 2018
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR)
- Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960
- Councillor Code of Conduct

This policy should be read alongside all adopted Council policies, in particular:

- Standing Orders
- Financial Regulations
- IT Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Safeguarding Policy
- Complaints Policy

2.2 Authority to speak on behalf of the Council

Only the Council acting collectively can determine Council policy.

No individual Councillor or Officer may represent themselves as speaking on behalf of the Council unless:

- authorised by a Council resolution
- acting with approved delegated authority to speak on specific matters
- responding to matters previously agreed by Council in a manner consistent with that previous agreement

When expressing personal views, Councillors must make it clear that those views are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Council.

The use of Council branding, logos, letterheads or email accounts does not automatically confer authority to speak on behalf of the Council.

2.3 General conduct

Councillors, staff, and any other representative of the Parish Council must communicate professionally, respectfully and accurately at all times.

For requests that relate to sensitive information, officers and Councillors should seek support from the Communications Officer, Clerk, or Chair to prepare a mutually agreed response.

Council communications must be:

- lawful
- accurate
- objective
- politically neutral
- proportionate
- accessible
- respectful

Councillors and Officers should work together to identify opportunities to promote Council activities and explain Council decisions clearly.

2.4 Media relations

The Council welcomes professional and constructive relationships with local media organisations. Press enquiries should normally be directed to the Clerk.
Official responses shall:

- reflect the agreed position of the Council

- be accurate and factual
- be approved by the Clerk or an authorised representative
- identify an appropriate contact for further information

When appropriate, official press releases may also be published on the Council website and social media channels.

2.5 Internal communications

Email, messaging applications, telephone calls and social media platforms are not to be used to make Council decisions. Decisions may only be made at properly convened meetings, by committees acting under delegated powers or through specific Officer delegations. The Council's own Scheme of Delegations, Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and Constitution govern this matter. Internal communications should be used, for example, when information sharing, administration and for operational matters.

2.6 Information governance

Communication records relating to Council business may be disclosable under:

- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Environmental Information Regulations 2004
- Data protection legislation.

Councillors and Officers must ensure that information is managed appropriately and that personal data is only used for legitimate Council purposes.

2.7 Crisis communications

In the event of a significant incident affecting the Parish or the Council, communications shall be coordinated by the Clerk, the Chair and the Communications and Community Engagement Officer.

Examples of a significant incident include:

- Flooding
- Major infrastructure failures
- Public health incidents
- Significant safeguarding concerns
- Major misinformation or reputational issues

During such situations, all public statements should be coordinated to ensure consistency and accuracy.

2.8 Financial Compliance

Communications campaigns will not exceed the budget set for the financial year unless agreed by resolution by the Council.

3. Parish Council Website

3.1 Purpose

The Council website shall serve as the primary source of official Council information.

The website should provide:

- Agendas and minutes
- Policy documents
- Financial information
- Councillor details
- News and updates
- Community information
- Statutory transparency information

Information should be reviewed regularly to ensure accuracy and relevance.

3.2 Accessibility Compliance

The website will maintain compliance with digital accessibility standards. They should be kept at a minimum WCAG 2.2 AA or whichever the base accessibility standard is in place at a given time.

4. Parish Newsletter

4.1 Purpose

The Parish Newsletter acts as a local news outlet for Parish residents. It provides information regarding the Council's activities, plans, and decisions as well as community news so that readers may stay engaged with events, groups, schemes, and initiatives that enhance community engagement and participation. All content must remain politically neutral.

4.2 Production Process

The Council retains ultimate editorial control of all content published in the Newsletter.

Submissions may be edited for length, style, corrected for accuracy and/or declined where considered inappropriate, defamatory, unlawful or inconsistent with Council objectives.

The Newsletter should be reviewed by relevant Staff and Councillors prior to publication.

There is no requirement for externally provided submissions to be published unless subject to an advertising contract. This could still be excluded due to the content being judged by the Editor to be inappropriate, defamatory, unlawful or inconsistent with Council objectives.

Each submission is to be reviewed by the Editor and may be subject to suggested amendments or feedback for the improvement of editorial quality.

If significant changes are made to a submission, written approval should be obtained from the original author where practicable.

4.3 Requirements

Content should be relevant to the Parish, and where possible, originating from an individual or organisation residing or operating within Parish boundaries.

The Newsletter should promote and support Council policy and objectives.

The Newsletter should provide a summary of minutes from recent Full Council meetings in plain English.

If a factual error is made in a publication, the Council will publish a correction through an appropriate communication channel at the earliest opportunity.

4.5 Advertising

Commercial businesses may only advertise in the Parish Newsletter using dedicated advertisement space where available. A minimum six issue contract should be in place for adverts to be published.

Businesses should review the Parish Newsletter webpage of the Parish Council website for more information - https://laverstockford-pc.gov.uk/love-your-parish/laverstock-ford-parish-newsletter/

5. Council Noticeboards

Priority is given on the Council's noticeboards to official Council documents, such as agendas, public notices, election information and legal issues affecting the Council.

Subject to available space, and relevant legislation, community information and event notices may also be displayed at the Council's discretion. Requests for display should be made to communications@laverstockford-pc.gov.uk.

6. Social Media

6.1 Purpose

The Council uses social media to share information; promote engagement; publicise events; communicate operational matters and signpost residents to services.

6.3 Moderation

Social media content must be factual, respectful, politically neutral and professional. Publishers must take reasonable steps to verify information before posting. Staff Officers and Councillors must not engage in arguments or disputes through Council channels. If Councillors or Officers wish to engage on Parish Council and/or local community posts, then this must be done in a polite and professional manner. Arguing with other users on public posts is not acceptable. Any concerns should be reported to the Clerk, and the Communications and Community Engagement Officer.

The Council is not obliged to respond to social media messages or comments. Users should contact the relevant Council member via email or telephone to ensure a response.

6.4 Removal of Content

If published content is found to be factually incorrect, misleading, inappropriate, in breach of Council policy, or presents a legal, safeguarding or reputational risk, it should be reviewed promptly in consultation with the Clerk.

Where appropriate, the content should be corrected or updated. Where a correction to the original content would not be sufficient, the content may be removed and, if necessary, a corrected follow-up or clarification published.

The Clerk may request that content is reviewed, amended or removed where there is a clear operational, legal, safeguarding or reputational reason for doing so.

6.5 Protection of Other Users & Councillors & Officers

The use of abusive or bigoted language or imagery directed towards other users, Councillors, and/or Officers is not tolerated. Users who share this content on the Parish Council channels through comments or post sharing, will be blocked, and their content deleted.

7. Pre-Election Periods

In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, the Council is subject to rules which impact on how it can communicate with the public.

During this time communications must not: promote individual councillors; support candidates; support political parties or address controversial issues in a way that could reasonably influence electoral outcomes.

Where quotations are required, preference will normally be given to Officers rather than elected members by elected members are you referring to Councillors? If so, consider saying Councillors?

8. Parish Council Email

8.1 General Principles

Laverstock and Ford Parish Council IT resources and email accounts are to be used for official Council-related activities and tasks. Limited personal use is permitted, provided it does not interfere with work responsibilities or violate any part of this policy. All users must adhere to ethical standards, respect copyright and intellectual property rights, and avoid accessing inappropriate or offensive content.

Responses to emails should be provided within reasonable timescales, recognising staff working hours and individual availability.

8.2 Councillors

Each Councillor has their own Council email address which is publicised for the public to use.

Councillors should actively monitor their emails for both internal and external communications and they should respond within reasonable timescales.

9. Mobile Devices

9.1 Personal Devices

Where possible, authorised devices, software, and applications will be provided by Laverstock and Ford Parish Council for work-related tasks. Unauthorised installation of software on authorised devices, including personal software, is strictly prohibited due to security concerns.

The Council recognises that at times, Councillors and staff may need to use their personal devices. Devices provided by Laverstock and Ford Parish Council are required to be kept safe and password protected. Councillors are strongly advised to keep their security updated.

All devices must:

- Be secured with a strong password/PIN/Biometrics and auto-lock after inactivity.
- Use encryption where available.
- Be kept updated with latest operating system and security patches.

They should be regularly checked for sensitive information and have such data cleared and deleted in line with our Document Retention and Deletion Policy.

9.2 Council Devices

Council-owned devices are provided for Council business only and must be used in accordance with all relevant Council policies.

9.3 Reporting security incidents

Please refer to the Council's adopted IT policy for actions needed to report security incidents or breaches.

10. Use of Images and Digital Media

For this section, also reference Laverstock & Ford Parish Council's Child Protection & Safeguarding policy.

10.1 General principles

The Council recognises the value of photography and video in promoting community activity whilst protecting privacy and safeguarding individuals.

Where an identifiable individual is the primary subject of an image, appropriate consent should be obtained before publication.

At public events, reasonable steps should be taken to notify attendees where photography or filming is taking place.

Photographers should be credited where appropriate.

10.2 Children and Young People

Written consent from a parent or guardian should be obtained before publishing images where children are the primary focus of a photograph. Please consider this suggestion. "Consider adding the age definition of i.e. child, youth & young person".

The Council's Safeguarding Policy must be followed at all times.

10.3 Storage of Images

Any image taken by the Parish Council will be stored, retained and deleted in accordance with data protection legislation and relevant Council policies.

11. What To Do in the Event of an Error

Where an error, inaccurate statement or breach of this policy occurs, the Council will take appropriate steps to:

- correct the information
- remove inappropriate content
- issue clarification where necessary
- consider further action in accordance with relevant Council procedures

Members of the public who believe this policy has been breached should contact the Parish Clerk in the first instance.