

Church Lawton Parish Council
Communication, Media and Community
Engagement Policy

1. Introduction

The aim is to keep all with whom we come into contact both informed of Parish Council actions and to understand a clear mechanism of communication within the Parish Council by a variety of means. The Parish Council wishes to encourage stakeholders to actively participate in influencing the future of the parish.

2. Scope of the Policy

The policy outlines communication around the Council's communication within the organisation, with other bodies and with the community. The community comprises:

- All residents of the Parish.
- All voluntary organisations that operate wholly or partly within the Parish, or that operate outside the Parish boundary in neighbouring areas but whose operations benefit Church Lawton residents.
- All users of Parish Council services or of the services of other organisations within the Parish.
- All those who work with, or own a business within, the Parish.
- Any other body or persons which we may contact us in relation to Parish Council business.
- Any other body or persons which the Parish Council need to contact in relation to Parish Council business.

The Council will especially strive to maintain strong relations and communication with key organisations and bodies such as Cheshire East Council, other Town and Parish Councils and the police.

The Council defines communication as the process of exchanging information and informing the community. This may be verbally, in writing or by other means and will be about decisions that have been made, options considered or the passing on of information.

The Council will engage with the community to help form opinion and review decisions.

The Council is always open to receiving both positive and negative feedback and has a commitment to encouraging the community to engage with the Council.

This policy applies equally to both council members and employees. Where the Clerk is referred to, the assistant clerk can be delegated by the Clerk for the task when required. In addition, the assistant Clerk will stand in for the Clerk in his/her absence and will resume all the delegation through this policy.

Other policies of the Council must be adhered to when using this policy. However, policies relating to complaints, grievances and disciplinary matters have defined communication pathways which may differ from this policy and can be treated as an exception to this policy.

3. The Role of Councillors, Chairman and officers.

Councillors represent the community in which they live and are governed by a Code of Conduct which encourages open, informed, timely and courteous communication at all times.

The Clerk is the chief officer of the Council. As such, the Clerk should receive all communications which ought to be formally brought to the attention of the Council and should issue all formal communications made by the Council. In the Clerk's absence, the assistant clerk will resume any role assigned to the clerk in this policy.

Councillors should pass communication they receive which is for the attention of the Council or one of its committees through to the Clerk. Councillors should also immediately refer any complaints or concerns relating to their conduct or of the Council received from residents to the Clerk and Chairman or as specified in the relevant policies.

Councillors should make it clear in all interactions with residents, the press, and third parties using email or other social media that they have no authority to represent the Council's view unless the matter has been agreed at a Council.

Members must be aware of what constitutes pre-determination and should not present themselves to as having completely and unretrievably made their mind up on an issue before voting at a meeting.

Councillors need to respect decisions made by the Council and its Committees as the Council's stance even if their own personal view may differ.

It is important not to raise the expectations of residents before a matter has been debated and agreed at a Council meeting. Neither Councillors nor officers should ever presume a decision or imply a Council stance prior to the matter being agreed by a majority show of hands at a Council or committee meeting.

When a member is speaking or corresponding in their capacity as a councillor, they may sign off as Councillor. The title should not be used when the issue is not of relevance to the member's role as a councillor or when a member is not speaking as a councillor. If used in correspondence by email, then the Council email address must be used.

Unless otherwise specified (see section 5c), the Chairman should comply with this policy in the same way as other councillors.

4. General Statement of Policy – Community Engagement

- The Council will strive to act as a lead in the community governance and adhesion in Church Lawton.
- The Clerk shall have delegated authority to determine the most appropriate communication methods from those agreed by Council to enable meaningful,

efficient and timely dissemination of information from the Parish Council whilst both adhering to this Policy and other Parish Council Policies. The clerk will ensure all online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

- The Parish Council website is the primary source of information on the Council for the community and will be kept up to date with all content routinely monitored. The Council aims to actively publish a wide range of information on the council and its activities. The website will be administered by officers.
- The Council will utilise noticeboards for key information and other statutory notices for the benefit of those in the community who don't use online communications.
- The Council will issue a paper newsletter approximately twice a year which will be delivered to every household in the Parish with copies available at other outlets within the Parish. The Clerk will have delegated authority to produce the newsletter, but the council will have opportunity to raise and agree items for inclusion through an agenda item prior to production. The completed newsletter should be circulated to the Council for comment with at least 48 hours' notice prior to being sent to publication.
- The Council will produce an e-newsletter approximately four to six weekly. The clerk will have delegated authority to put this together and issue it but will circulate to councillors first for comment with at least 48 hours' notice. Councillors may contact the Clerk with suggestions for inclusion. The Clerk will have the right to not include material felt to be inappropriate.
- The Council will use social media, such as Facebook, to provide news about Church Lawton and to request opinions and comments. This will be through the Parish Council accounts run by officers although it is recognised that posts may be copied to other groups and pages. The Council will review all comments received on the Council's social media but will not be expected to reply to all comments; this will be at the discretion of the Clerk who will reply on behalf of council. The chairman may have access to enable him/her to fulfil the civic role.
- The Council shall continue to set aside time at every Council and Committee meeting for members of the public to address the Council.
- The Council shall continually look to provide opportunities for members of the public to discuss issues with councillors. Councillor email addresses should be published on the website to enable the public to easily contact them.
- The Council will develop and promote effective Annual Parish Meetings to allow the public an effective forum for raising issues related to the Parish. The Council will commit to facilitate and assist in follow-up of issues raised.

- The Council shall continue to appoint members to represent the Council on community organisations as requested. These representatives will feed back to the Council through meetings.
- Where appropriate, the Council will seek volunteers from the community to 'sit' on Council task and working groups to inform and enhance the communication and tasks of these groups.

5. Communications

a. Parish Council Correspondence Generally.

- The point of contact for the parish council is the clerk, and it is to the clerk that all correspondence for the parish council should be addressed. If councillors erroneously receive correspondence intended for the Council as a body, they will inform the recipient and pass the correspondence to the Clerk.
- The clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting unless the Council has agreed a specified councillor may do so and there is good reason. In this case, the correspondence should be issued through the Clerk.
- The Clerk shall have the sole delegated authority to issue and answer correspondence on behalf of the Council which he/she feels has no need to wait or cannot wait to the next meeting. The clerk should consult with the chair or relevant committee chair first on any matters which could be sensitive or contentious. The Clerk is not delegated through this clause to make key decisions for the Council.
- Councillors may sometimes receive and need to reply to emails or correspondence directly from members of the community or third parties as part of a councillor's role of helping in the community (casework). Councillors may also need to send emails to other parties when conducting casework or seeking information as part of their role as councillor. This should be seen as an integral part of a councillor's role. As long as Council business is not directly impinged, these emails do not need to be forwarded or copied to the clerk or anyone else on the Council. However, if any opinion or view is expressed, councillors should be clear that they are not corresponding or acting on behalf of the Council as a body, but as an individual councillor.

If correspondence does directly involve Council (or committee) business, then the clerk and chair (or chair of the relevant committee) should be copied in, the matter passed over to the Clerk, or the correspondent advised to write to the Clerk. Councillors should not act as the both the main and sole point of contact for Council business.

- No individual councillor or officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the parish council, a committee, subcommittee or working party. In particular, councillors and

officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information / documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'. The Clerk and assistant Clerk will maintain a central record repository for the Council and in the name of the Council.

- All official correspondence should be sent by the clerk in the name of the council using council letter headed paper, or by email with clear signature if appropriate. The exception is matters relating to Civic duties of the chairman and some other instances where Council correspondence may be issued directly by the chairman (see 5c).
- Where written correspondence is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (e.g., copy to XX).
- Councillors must always abide by the code of conduct and data protection policy when corresponding in their role as a councillor.

b. Use of Council Email.

- Councillors and officers of the Council must always use Council email accounts and not personal accounts when corresponding in their roles.
- Council email addresses should not be used for any other purpose other than when acting in the role of either officer or councillor.
- Blind copy may sometimes have a legitimate use, such as complying with data protection, but should not be used for covert reasons otherwise. When using email correspondence, any blind copy (bcc) recipients must be named (personal name or role in an organisation) in the body of the email, but their email address will not be seen.
- Councillors and officers should not indiscriminately use 'reply all' unless there is very good reason to do so as this can lead to key emails being missed by others.
- Neither councillors nor officers should forward 'internal' emails to other parties outside of the organisation. Neither councillors nor officers should copy other parties into 'internal' emails without very good reason. An example of good reason might be working group emails where members of the public are part of the group or copying in a Cheshire East Ward councillor. The Clerk will have the last say on what constitutes 'good reason'.
- Councillors should remember that all emails, unless covered by an exemption, can be subject to Freedom of Information requests and Subject Access requests. It is the Clerk's responsibility to appropriately respond to such requests in accordance with Council policy. Councillors and officers must not use personal email addresses to circumvent this.

- Councillors should never use email to debate Council issues instead of proper debate through meetings. Decision making by email by councillors is not lawful and would be open to challenge. However, when decisions have been delegated to the clerk, the clerk may use email to consult councillors before coming to a decision.
- Parish Councillors who are also elected members of Cheshire East Council must always use the email address appropriate to their action. When acting as a Cheshire East Councillor, this policy does not apply.
- Councillors and Officers must always heed General Data Protection rules and the Council's policy. Personal information received in emails should not be passed on without permission.

c. Chairman's use of email and other correspondence.

- The chairman of the Council can issue emails and correspondence and respond independently in all matters relating to his civic duties of the Council without recourse to the Council or clerk. The Clerk should be copied in for information purposes when required.
- The chairman (and committee chairmen) can also receive and issue correspondence on behalf of the Council which might be permitted through other policies.
- The chairman (or committee chairmen) may receive and respond to any emails directed to him/her as an individual councillor as can any other councillor. Some of these emails may be sent due to their role as chairman (or committee chairman).
- Sometimes, the chairman (or committee chairman) may be written to in the capacity of that role with correspondence intended for the Council as a whole. These emails should be copied to the Clerk and treated as Council correspondence. The chairman and clerk can consult and agree the chairman reply directly on behalf of the Council if felt appropriate and a response cannot wait until the next Council meeting.
- The chairman has no power over other councillors in day-to-day council matters and, other than as outlined in this section, this policy applies equally to him/her as to other councillors.

6. Consultations by the Parish Council

The Parish Council may use various media to consult with the community. Parish Council consultations must be agreed by the Council or a committee and will be administered by officers.

7. Media and Press Releases

- The clerk is the council's nominated Press Officer and will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chair of the council or the Chair of the relevant committee.
- Official press reports from the council, its committees or working parties should be from the clerk or an officer delegated by the clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- The Clerk can refer the reporter the other councillors for added comment but should get permission from the councillor first. Councillors should be aware that they might be contacted directly by the press.
- Unless a councillor has been authorised by the council to speak to the media on a particular issue, councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view unless the comment relates to approved council policy and decisions.
- Parish Councillors who also sit on Cheshire East Council should be clear to the press in which capacity they are speaking. If speaking on behalf of Cheshire East, then this policy will not apply.

8. Use of Social Media

a. Use of Social Media other than email by the Council

The clerk will manage the Council's social media accounts.

The council recognises that social media is an effective means of communication and will operate various social media channels as part of its communications.

The Council also recognises that social media, including the website, is not used by all members of the community and cannot be seen as being comprehensive in its reach.

Social media messages will be non-political, uncontroversial and used to promote the activities of the Parish Council, pass on information from other parties and to highlight Church Lawton.

For complex issues users should be referred to traditional forms of communication e.g., email or telephone.

Council communication by media such as Whatsapp or Teams chat is allowed but any group set up must be administered by the Clerk and must only be used for limited issues such as checking availability for meeting dates where a quick response may be desirable. Councillors have the right to opt out and be communicated with by other means.

b. Councillor use of Social Media

Councillors have a right to use their own social media accounts in the capacity as an individual councillor, but not in a capacity of representing the Council as a body. Councillors should be mindful that, when posting in what would be considered the role of a councillor, then they are strongly advised to abide by the code of conduct, data protection policy and any other relevant policy and must not imply at any time that they are acting as the Parish Council as a body.

Councillors may choose to respond to posts which arise on various sites or groups in their role as an individual councillor. Councillors are politely requested not to tag other councillors or officers into posts as individual councillors are not obliged to use social media in their role and should choose their own involvement. If a Councillor feels that a social media post needs bringing to the attention of the Council, then the Clerk should be contacted.

Councillors using Social Media in their role as a councillor are advised to read the NALC Civility and Respect Guidance as the Council will take no responsibility over misuse of social media not on the Council owned accounts and the individual councillor, and not the Council, would be liable for any misuse or resulting complaints or claims:

[Social Media Civility & Respect Guide and Policy Supplement - Google Docs](#)