

# RUSPER PARISH COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

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## INTRODUCTION

Rusper Parish Council (RPC) articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what RPC does, whilst also enabling RPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

The principles of these Guidelines apply to Parish Councillors and The Clerk to RPC. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

Good communications enables RPC to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the parish
- be an effective voice of the community
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the image or integrity of RPC or the parish

## WHO IS COMMUNICATING

### PARISH CLERK

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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.

### COUNCILLORS

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Elected Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of RPC regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject.

All enquiries from the public would normally be through the Parish Clerk. Councillors should avoid making any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to RPC or its responsibilities. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- give factual information and refer the member of the public to the relevant minutes on the Parish website
- refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- request, through the Parish Clerk, that an item is placed on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk, including the wording of any response.

When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk will be sought.

## **COUNCIL MEETINGS AND COUNCILLOR INTERACTIONS**

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RPC meets on the last Tuesday of every month. Meetings start at 7:30pm. The agenda allows the public to raise issues and make representations. RPC sub-committees and working groups' activities are reported back to the council at the monthly meetings. Minutes/notes are published on the RPC website.

An initial draft of committee minutes is produced by the Clerk and issued to relevant members by email for review. Subject to any amendments a subsequent draft is published on the RPC website. Minutes are finalised at the next committee meeting, and the confirmed version, incorporating any further amends (as per Standing Orders) is re-published on the RPC website following approval.

Councillors assigned responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall keep the Clerk updated and report back to the next relevant meeting.

Guidance on interaction:

- RPC Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the parish council;
- All media enquiries should be directed to the Chair or the Parish Clerk in the first instance (who will liaise with the Chair of RPC or relevant Committee). The response may be delegated to another councillor with particular knowledge of an issue, keeping the Clerk and Chair of RPC updated.
- All media comment must accurately reflect RPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of RPC made in an open meeting 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 not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of RPC or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the council or members of the community.
- Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from RPC's Solicitor before any response is made.
- Should an occasion arise where a Councillor wishes to make a 'personal statement', they must make clear:
  - that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of RPC;
  - that other councillors may hold a different view;
  - that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by RPC.

## **HOW WE SHOULD BE COMMUNICATING**

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. At the same time, for many people, traditional methods – newsletters/leaflets, posters, notices etc. – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

RPC's general communication strategy is overseen by the RPC Working Group, and supported day-to-day by the Clerk. Routes of communication include:

- Notices on village notice boards
- Online messages via
  - News posts on the Rusper Parish Council website and Facebook page
  - the Rusper Village Facebook page
- Contributions to local publications (Parish News) and other newsletters of local groups where appropriate
- Press release if appropriate

The Council will continue to explore ways in which communication could be improved.

## **COMMUNICATION - GOOD PRACTICE**

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It is important that:

- all communication from RPC is courteous, timely, professional, appropriate and reflects the decisions and policies of council;
- all individuals communicating on behalf of RPC are aware that every piece of communication reflects on the reputation of RPC in the community;

Staff and councillors are ambassadors of RPC and this is reflected in all communications. Any communications from RPC will meet the following criteria:

- be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- not contain content that is knowingly discriminatory, unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, religious, or racially offensive;
- not knowingly contain copyrighted content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which RPC does not have permission to use;
- not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
- if official business, in any case of doubt, communications will be referred to the Chair or the Clerk to RPC prior to release;
- social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

Equally, it is expected that any communications to RPC will meet these criteria. The response to offensive material will be that the RPC only enters into correspondence if communications meet the above standards.

Any information posted on either the RPC or the Rusper Village Facebook page which is not in line with the above criteria, will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the pages.

## **PRESS – MEDIA MANAGEMENT**

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RPC's general policy for dealing with the press/media states:

*If practical any releases to the press or other media are to be approved by the Council but if due to time constraints this is not possible only the Clerk and/or the Chairman can deal with the press/media on behalf of the Council.*

Key points for effective management of media relations:

- Seek to respond to journalists within a reasonable time
- Be helpful, polite and positive (and avoid saying 'no comment')
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Parish Clerk, RPC Chair or Chair of the relevant Committee
- Being 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**

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The village notice boards will be kept updated 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.

The Parish Clerk will manage all posting of notices to the locked boards.

## **ONLINE PRESENCE**

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### **Parish Council Website and Facebook page**

Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent and RPC's website and Facebook page must be kept up-to-date. Currently this work sits with the Clerk and the Councillor responsible for technology but there is no obstacle in principle to this work being shared by Councillors. Before RPC or Councillors publish any post which has identifiable images of children, permission from parents should be sought.

All communications should promote the council website and if appropriate our social media presence.

It is important to ensure that links to the website are provided from other key partners, including Horsham District Council and WSCC.

### **Rusper Village Facebook page**

The Rusper Village Facebook Page is a public group for anyone who wants to talk about things which are happening in the community and as a means of people getting in touch with other, asking for recommendations, advertising their services and events. It is not under the control of Rusper Parish Council and formal communications by RPC which appear here will only be in the form of posts which have been shared from the Parish Council Facebook page in a private capacity by the Clerk or a Councillor who is a member of the group.

Councillors when posting in a personal capacity on the Rusper Village Facebook page must be mindful of their role on RPC.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

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The Rusper Parish News is a monthly publication produced by a local group and is paid for by advertising. The Parish News is delivered by hand to the majority of households in the parish and is available in the local shop. RPC will include an update of its activities in each edition. In between the editions of the Parish News, RPC relies on the online communications routes above, as well as dedicated communications relating to special events.

### **PUBLISHING OF PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRIVACY ISSUES**

The Clerk and Councillors using the various modes of communication 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. 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**

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RPC 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 RPC "Would I be happy if this was posted on the RPC notice Board?"

Councillors should use their RPC email for all RPC business. The RPC web site will hide councillors email address; should a member of the parish wish to contact a particular member of the Council, text with the format **send a message** will 'bounce' emails to RPC personal email addresses.

clerk@rusper-pc.org.uk will continue as the email address managed by the Parish Clerk. Members of the parish should be encouraged to contact the Clerk in the first instance unless it relates to a specific topic or for a specific reason for which the Councillor in question is known to lead. The Clerk and the Chairman will hold the password to the email account.

### **GOOD PRACTICE AND GUIDANCE AROUND USE OF EMAIL**

All emails to other bodies and members of the public will be sent via the Clerk. Councillors are asked to note the following guidance:

#### **Use of email in discussing RPC's position 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. RPC has made provision for decision-making to be delegated and handled via email in certain specific cases but it is important to note that the scope of this is strictly limited. Councillors should try to refrain from sending views on topics round to other Councillors before discussion on topics at public meetings to ensure the transparency of the RPC's decision-making process. Rather than bring up a new issue to all RPC colleagues, Councillors should write to the Clerk (optionally with copy to the Chair of RPC, or of the relevant committee/working group) who will then decide how to take it forward.

The Clerk will make it clear in emails if a matter is for information only. Councillors should refrain from passing comment by email of information-only items as it creates unnecessary email traffic. Where a response is appropriate, still think carefully about sending comments back just to the author of an email rather than replying to all other recipients. Councillor colleagues do not want to have large numbers of unnecessary emails in their inboxes

#### **Transmission of personal data via email.**

Councillors, staff, the Council's contractors and agents shall not disclose confidential information or personal data without legal justification.

Although it happens only infrequently, email correspondence between members will 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.
- In addition, 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.

## **Retention of RPC-related emails by Councillors.**

The reasons for giving Councillors guidance in relation to retaining PC emails are: a) the basic DP principle of not keeping personal data (which includes personal email addresses) longer than needed for the original purpose; and b) good practical e-housekeeping. On that basis the general guidance is:

- for RPC email correspondence that does not contain sensitive information and does not relate to contractual, audit, employment or other similar formal matters (which have specific retention schedules managed via the Clerk), to keep for a maximum of two years or when the issue has been closed.

## **VILLAGE LOGO**

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RPC adopts particular logos from time to time, and uses them to brand the PC and the parish. An appropriate logo should be used in all communication material from the council.

Adopted: 25th February 2020

Approved: 14<sup>th</sup> May 2024