



**Gateforth Parish Council**

# COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

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## INTRODUCTION

Gateforth Parish Council (GPC) 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 GPC does, whilst also enabling GPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

The principles of this Policy apply to Parish Councillors and the Clerk to GPC. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

Good communications enable GPC 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 such as young people
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the image or integrity of GPC or the parish

## WHO IS COMMUNICATING

### 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 GPC (using council letter headed paper)
- Correspondence entered into with an individual (e.g. in response to an enquiry made by that individual)
- Responses to unsolicited enquiries to GPC from third parties (e.g. the Press)
- Correspondence initiated by GPC to an individual
- Correspondence to or from other Public Bodies, Advisory Bodies, Membership Organisations, Insurance, Legal and Financial institutions and all other Business correspondence (*this list is not exhaustive*)
- Public Notices

The Parish Clerk will acknowledge enquiries (as outlined above) within 7 working days of being notified. It should be noted that these enquiries could be received in person, by telephone, letter or email. They can also be via referral from a Councillor. As part of the acknowledgement, the Parish Clerk will outline how the enquiry will be progressed. This could include the following:

- Include the enquiry on the agenda for the next Parish Council meeting
- Handle as per the GPC Complaints Policy
- Transfer the enquiry to appropriate Parish Council (if not applicable to GPC)
- Respond directly to the parishioner with suitable response

## COUNCILLORS

Elected members 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 GPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

Councillors will refer all enquiries that can't be answered immediately to the Parish Clerk.

Councillors should avoid making any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they pass the enquiry to the Parish Clerk who will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to GPC 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 to deal with it as appropriate, as guided by the GPC Policy framework
- 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 GPC Policy reference, agreement of timescales and the wording of any response

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

## COUNCIL MEETINGS AND COUNCILLOR INTERACTIONS

GPC meets quarterly. Meetings, and associated timings, will be advertised on the GPC website and posted on the GPC Notice Board, situated inside the Bus Shelter on the Village Green. The agenda's should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision and for Councillors and the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at the meeting. The agenda should allow time for the public to raise issues and make representations towards the end of the formal meeting.

An initial draft of the meeting minutes is produced by the Clerk and issued to relevant members within 30 working days by email for review. Subject to any amendments a subsequent draft is published on the GPC website. Minutes are finalised at the next

Council meeting, and the confirmed version, incorporating any further amends (as per Standing Orders) is re-published on the GPC website following approval.

Councillors assigned responsibility for some actions, which involve written or verbal communications with third parties, shall keep the Clerk updated and report back to the next relevant meeting. An action log will be produced to assist the Clerk and Councillors in this process.

Guidance on interaction:

GPC 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. The response may be delegated to another Councillor with particular knowledge of an issue, keeping the Clerk and Chair of GPC updated.
- All media comment must accurately reflect GPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of GPC 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 GPC 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 GPC's Solicitor before any response is made, and must be in line with GPC Policies.
- On the rare occasion that Councillors wish to make a 'personal statement', they must make clear:
  - that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of GPC;
  - that other Councillors may hold a different view;
  - that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by GPC.

## 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.

GPC's general communication strategy is overseen by the Clerk. Routes of communication include:

- Notices on village notice boards
- Online messages via:
- News posts on the GPC website
- the GPC "X" page
- Contributions to newsletters of local groups where appropriate
- Press releases

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

## COMMUNICATION - GOOD PRACTICE

It is important that:

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

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

- be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;

- not knowingly contain copyrighted content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which GPC 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 GPC Clerk prior to release;
- social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

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

Any information posted on the GPC “X” 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 page.

## **PRESS – MEDIA MANAGEMENT**

GPC’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 or GPC Chair.
- 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**

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

### Council Website

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

GPC's website is to be kept up to date by the Parish Clerk and/or nominated Councillor.

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 North Yorkshire Council.

### Social Media – GPC Controlled

The GPC "X" 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 each other, asking for recommendations, advertising their services and events. Formal communications by GPC will only be made by the Parish Clerk and/or nominated Councillor and will usually link back to a full statement on the Parish website.

Councillors when posting in a personal capacity must be mindful of their role on GPC.

Before the GPC or Councillors make any post, which had identifiable images of children, prior permission from parents must be sought.

People who join the group post to the page themselves, providing an open forum for local groups and businesses. Posts are monitored by the Parish Clerk and/or nominated Councillor to ensure the content is appropriate for a GPC-led initiative. Posts can be taken down. If anyone complains about a post, refer them to the Parish Clerk. Alternatively, a Councillor, who is also a member of the group, can send a Personal Message to the person who made the post to request they delete or edit the post.

The GPC has adopted a set of "X" rules (*see Appendix*).

## Social Media – Not GPC Controlled

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 GPC (regardless of the Councillor's individual views on the subject) should be very carefully considered since they could be perceived as coming from GPC. Therefore, any views expressed by Councillors relating in any way to GPC should be avoided.

## PUBLICATIONS

The “**Gateforth Parish Council Newsletter**” is a quarterly publication. The Newsletter is delivered (either by hand, or by post) to all households in the parish. In between the editions of the Newsletter, GPC 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 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

GPC 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 GPC “Would I be happy if this was posted on the GPC notice Board?”

Councillor email addresses are published on the GPC website for Council business. Councillors with any concerns about using their personal email address can be given email alias addresses based on the GPC website (i.e. with the format J.Bloggs.gpc@outlook.com), which will ‘bounce’ emails to personal addresses.

**gateforthpc@gmail.com** will continue as the email address managed by the Parish Clerk. Members of the community should be encouraged to contact the Parish 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 on.

## GOOD PRACTICE AND GUIDANCE AROUND USE OF EMAIL

### Use of email in discussing Council positions on issues

A core governance rule for all Parish Councils 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 before discussion on topics at public meetings, to ensure the transparency of the GPC's decision making process. Rather than bringing up a new issue to all GPC colleagues, Councillors should write to the Clerk (optionally with copy to the Chair of GPC) 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.

### Transmission of personal data via email.

GPC's Standing Orders (11d) make this general statement: *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 GPC) 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 GPC RELATED EMAILS BY COUNCILLORS

The reasons for giving Councillors guidance in relation to retaining GPC emails are:

- the basic Data Protection principle of not keeping personal data (which includes personal email addresses) longer than needed for the original purpose
- good practical e-housekeeping. On that basis, the general guidance is: to delete when the issue has been closed, and generally not to retain correspondence for more than one year. (The exceptions to this rule are where the GPC email correspondence contains sensitive information and/or relates to contractual, audit, employment or other similar formal matters. These will have specific retention schedules managed via the Parish Clerk.

## VILLAGE LOGO

*GPC adopts the following logos and uses them to brand the Parish Council.*

An appropriate logo should be used in all communication material from the council.

### GPC green logo



### GPC white logo



## APPENDIX: GPC “X” SITE ~ COMMUNITY RULES

**1. Admins (Parish Clerk and/or nominated Councillor) will monitor content.**

Post approval is not required but the page and its contents will be monitored regularly. Offending posts or comments will be removed without notice. Repeat offenders will be removed from the group.

**2. Be respectful and polite**

No bullying, hate speech or offensive comments regarding race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity. No “naming and shaming”.

**3. Be helpful**

Healthy debate is natural, but kindness is required. If you don't agree with something either ignore it or keep your contribution constructive. No belittling or rude comments.

**4. Only local businesses will be accepted**

Businesses that are owned by local residents or operate within a 10 mile radius of Gateforth will be allowed. Once accepted businesses must adhere to rule 5 or will be removed.

**5. No repetitive business posts or spamming**

Business posts are limited to one post per week. No post “bumping” is allowed, new posts must be unique. No link dumping or spamming on other posts.

**6. No political posts**

This is a community page, discussions regarding politics are best kept on your own social media profiles.

**7. No “For Sale” posts**

No selling of any items, there are many local selling sites that can be used instead.