



COMMUNICATIONS POLICY CONTENTS

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1.0 Introduction

Knaresborough Town Council has undertaken to ‘communicate, consult and engage’. The purpose of this policy is therefore to set out how the Council intends to achieve this and develop and improve its communications in the future.

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

2.0 Communication

2.1 Why is communication important?

Local government communications have, over the past few years, increasingly focused on reputation. Improved communications lead to recognition and respect – reputation **does** matter. Many councils fail to effectively communicate who they are and what they do – and the less people know about an organisation, the less likely they are to rate it highly.

The Town Council, through good communication, will understand and better meet the needs of the community, whilst raising the profile of the Town of Knaresborough and the Town council.

Good communications will enable the council to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- raise residents’ satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about services provided by the Council.
- raise the profile of Knaresborough as a destination
- attract businesses / employment to the town
- 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 brand image or integrity of the council

2.2 What should we be communicating?

There are two methods of communicating:

- Proactive – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
- Reactive – giving residents information they have requested

Research by MORI, an independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, suggests that the most important drivers of council reputation among local residents are:

- perceived quality of services overall
- perceived value for money
- media coverage
- direct communications
- council performance
- a clean, green and safe environment
- positive experiences of contact with council employees

If the council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its proactive and reactive communications.

2.3 Who should we be communicating with?

The council's audiences are wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents
- Harrogate Borough Councillors and staff
- North Yorkshire County Councillors and staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people
- The media
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- MPs
- Other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the area

2.4 How should we be communicating?

The council will ensure that information is easily accessible, relevant and timely, whilst recognising the importance of communication, making a commitment to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

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 considered in order to communicate effectively with everyone.

The advances made in information technology offer exciting new ways of communicating. At the same time, for many people, traditional methods – newspapers, telephone, and leaflets – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

Currently communication is achieved through:

- Press releases
- The Council's website
- Social Media
- Council agenda papers / correspondence
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultation

Ways in which communication could be improved:

- Improved visibility of the council and its activities by more frequent reporting
- All committee/working group chairmen will regularly give updates on committee activity
- The introduction of an updating Parish Council communication e.g. newsletter, social media communication etc
- Continued use of social media and promotion of the council's online presence
- Regular consultation with the community and feedback to them on subsequent analysis including actions resulting from the consultation. i.e. You said this and We did that.

2.4.1 Press

The media can play a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital.

The Communities and Local Government Report found people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local media.

Key points for effective management of media relations

- Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time
- Be helpful, polite and positive
- Never say 'no comment'
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Town Clerk or the Chairman
- Issue timely and relevant press releases
- Pre-empt potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR (where possible)

2.4.2 Online presence - the council's website

The council's website is to be regularly updated and, as much as possible, kept up to date.

It is important to work out strategies for keeping the website up to date and for ensuring good links with local businesses and community groups.

2.4.3 Effective use of social media

To continue the effective use of social media in order to promote the activities of the Council. It is agreed that these are accepted methods of promotion of the Council's activities.

2.4.4 Better promotion of the council's online presence

All communications should promote the Council's website and if appropriate its social media accounts.

It is important to ensure that links on our website are provided to other key partners, especially Harrogate Borough Council and North Yorkshire County Council.

2.4.5 Public Consultation - Carry out regular and effective consultation

At present, most of the council's consultation is by way of occasional questionnaires on specific subjects and members' interaction with the public.

The council needs to establish means by which consultations will take place to cover all aspects of life in Knaresborough, so that a full understanding of the needs of the community are developed. An action plan and council priorities can be developed, which will be reviewed regularly.

An in-depth consultation could be repeated at the end of year 1/beginning year 2 following elections. This will help to ensure that the council is engaged, delivering relevant services and truly representing the needs of the community to other authorities /partners. The information obtained will also help to provide useful evidence in support of initiatives and funding bids.

In addition, regular consultation should be undertaken by the council / councillors to gather public opinion on perception and satisfaction of the council and the work it does. The results of this consultation would also help to better understand the council's strengths and weaknesses, as well as helping the council to measure the effectiveness of its work in general and this strategy specifically.

The format for this consultation could include the following:

Who – develop an understanding of the demographics of the community and

How - establish ways of communicating with each of these that best encourages their engagement in the process

What – consider what information is required and develop relevant means of achieving this whilst still being appropriate, accessible and engaging

Where – define the best locations for accessing and engaging with the different groups identified

When – develop a timetable for the consultation process including when it is intended to hold consultation ‘events’

Once completed, council should develop strategies for delivering services and improvements where identified.

2.5 Who (from the council) should be communicating?

Staff and councillors are all ambassadors of the council and must remember this in all communications.

It is imperative that:

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

2.5.1 Verbal and Written Communication

The Town Clerk has overall responsibility for overseeing all ‘formal’ town council communication with members of the community and outside bodies.

All councillors and the Town Clerk have a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

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

Elected members will be regularly approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. At no time should elected members make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to promise to investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to the parish council. Depending on the issue raised it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- refer the matter to the Town Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- request that an item is placed on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having first sought the guidance of the Town Clerk

All communication *must* be responded to and the correspondent kept apprised of progress. The procedure for doing so is as follows:

1. having received an enquiry / complaint, the councillor should acknowledge receipt (if in writing) and advise of what action is intended to be taken.
2. advise when that action has been taken and what to expect next (e.g a response is awaited from (a third party)
3. report back on the outcome of the enquiry or ensure that either the third party or the Town Clerk will / has report(ed) back on the matter

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

3.0 Evaluation

It is extremely important that the council measures the success of this strategy so that it may inform any future plan. A benchmark of the current state will be required.

What improvements can we measure as a result of better/increased communication?

Media's assessment of Knaresborough Town Council's communication coverage
Raised awareness of the Town Council and the services it provides
Attitudes of all stakeholders towards Town Council
Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes
Increased attendance at Public meetings and organized events.

How will we measure this?

Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys
Increase in take up of Press Releases sent to local media
Hits on website
Number of Likes and Followers on Social Networking sites (when applicable)

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