

Associated Policies

This policy should be read alongside the following Council policies and procedures:

- Code of Conduct
- Data Protection Policy
- Freedom of Information Policy
- Publication Scheme
- Complaints Policy
- Social Media & Digital Communications Policy
- IT & Electronic Communications Policy
- Safeguarding Policy
- Standing Orders
- Equality & Diversity Policy

The Principles for all Communications and Engagement

DO:

1. Be objective and even-handed
2. Be clear and concise
3. Remain positive and constructive
4. Have regard for equality and diversity
5. Have regard for the long-term reputation of the Council
6. Abide by the Members' Code of Conduct
7. Ensure you are well informed of the facts
8. Show respect to all members of the public, councillors and officers.
9. Assume all written communications, emails and social media posts may become public records
10. Report any significant media, reputational or online concerns promptly to the Clerk.

DO NOT:

1. Speak on behalf of the Council unless you have the authority. Instead, make it clear that any views you express are your personal views.
2. Slander or libel anyone
3. Discuss any confidential or sensitive information about the Council, its members or staff. Do not reveal personal data about anyone without their express permission
4. Publish anything purporting to be on behalf of the Council that could be deemed to be party-political (Local Government Act 1986, s.2)
5. Disclose confidential matters or criticise Council policies or personnel
6. Post on social media images that include young people without parental permission
7. Use AI-generated or digitally manipulated content in a misleading, defamatory or deceptive manner.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define roles and responsibilities within Berryfields Parish Council and give guidelines on external communications, contact with the media, effective use of social media, engagement with the public and to provide advertising guidelines across Council-owned channels.

2. Key Objectives

At all times, the Council aims to ensure communications are:

Transparent

The Council is accountable to the local community and should be open about the decisions we make and how we are governed.

Constructive

The Council's efforts and communications should focus on how we can improve the local area for the benefit of its parishioners.

Proactive

The Council should anticipate the information that beneficiaries will want to know and communicate this to them in the right way, at the right time.

Empowering

By providing the community with the information they need to know, the Council can help them to help themselves.

Engaging

Our use of the media is central to gauging the priorities and wishes of the local community and service users, which in turn helps shape those services.

3. Legal Framework

In addition to general legislation and common law, law and guidance specific to local authority communications includes:

- Local Government Act 1986 s.2
- Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity
- The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014
- Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960
- Local Government Transparency Code 2015
- UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018

4. Attendance of the Public & Media at Meetings

- The public and press are welcome and encouraged to attend all meetings of the Council and its committees.
- The Council may, however, temporarily exclude the public or the press or both, by a resolution, governed by the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 s.1(2). This provision should be used sparingly and only where essential.
- Any Council meetings may be audio or video recorded, live streamed, and photographs may be taken, except where the public and press have been excluded.

- Agendas, reports and minutes (less any confidential papers) will be made available to the media or members of the public free of charge.
- The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings, and seating and workspace will be made available.

5. Press Communications

- The Council continually seeks to develop a more open and transparent debate to accompany our corporate decisions based on consensus amongst Councillors whenever possible.
- The Council welcomes public debate on parish matters via the press and is grateful for any opportunity to engage with the community.
- The Council's position is as stated in the minutes and in formal statements issued by the Office of the Council on Council headed paper.
- All communications issued on behalf of the whole Council must be seen by the Clerk prior to publication.
- Any member of the Council may draft a press release in line with Council policy and position, however they must all be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles and statutory requirements are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council, and that the use of the press release can be monitored.
- Individual Councillors may have views which do not agree with the Council's position and, of course, we recognise that they must be free to air them as individuals.
- Where the Council is being discussed in the press or other media, we would welcome the opportunity to respond to ensure a balanced approach and that the public are being properly informed of the Council's position.
- Those seeking the position of the Council should, in the first instance, contact the Council office.
- Councillors speaking in a personal capacity must make clear they are expressing personal views and not the formal position of the Council.

6. Website

- The Council's website will be the first point of contact for most residents, visitors, businesses, local groups and funders. It should be regularly updated and all information on the site should be accurate, accessible and compliant with applicable website accessibility requirements where reasonably practicable.
- The Clerk will retain editorial control of the website. However, councillors may contribute material through blogs, news articles, and social media feeds.
- The Council does not permit external advertising on its website. Any links shared will be for matters of public interest or official government information.

7. Social Media

For the purposes of this policy, social media covers sites and applications including, but not restricted, to Facebook, X (formally Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums, wikis and any sites which may emerge after the creation of this policy where the Council could be represented.

- The Council acknowledges social media as a useful communication tool. However, clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that its use does not expose the Council to security risks, reputational damage, confidentiality issues or breaches of data protection legislation.
- Councillors and officers using AI-assisted or digitally generated content in relation to Council business must ensure information is accurate, lawful and not misleading.
- Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with this guidance. Social media sites are in the public domain and officers must ensure the reliability of the information published. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without consent, used in different contexts or further distributed.
- From time to time, the Council may have to respond to negative or inaccurate issues and may become involved in drawn out conversations on social media. Members and officers must alert the Clerk as soon as practicable, so that the situation can be managed effectively and efficiently to minimise negative, inaccurate or inappropriate publicity.
- Council social media must not be used for party political purposes or specific party- political campaigning. Officers may promote councillors' social media accounts for Council specific issues as appropriate, but not during any pre-election purdah period or periods of high sensitivity such as by-elections.
- Councillors are at liberty to set up accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Parish Council's view. Councillors should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language. Councillors should avoid engaging in online conduct likely to bring the Council into disrepute.
- The Parish Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of the Council Social Media channels agreed by the Council. Councillors officially appointed by the Council may assist the Parish Clerk to disseminate information. However, all must ensure they follow this policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the Parish Clerk. Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts but they should ensure they comply with this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

Below are some extra guidelines for Councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

- Handheld devices and laptops are permitted (indeed encouraged) for use during meetings to allow environmentally friendly and effective communication. The use of such devices is intended to improve communication during meetings - not to interrupt or distract anyone taking part. Ensure the volume on all electronic devices is turned to 'mute'.
- Councillors' tweets/blogs during Council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting - tweeting/blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting.
- Councillors have a responsibility to take Council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members. Berryfields residents expect debate and to be informed about Council business, not witness petty arguments.

- Remember that if you break the law using social media (for example by posting something defamatory), you will be personally responsible.

8. Emails

- All Councillors are given dedicated email accounts, which must be used for all Council business. Councillors should not forward on confidential information from the email account. Councillors should follow best practice and not forward emails from their Councillor account to their personal account. Councillors must not give anyone else access to their account.
- Any email correspondence relating to official business of the Council may be subject to a Freedom of Information request, regardless of whether it is held in the dedicated Councillor email account, or their private account.
- With this in mind, Councillors should ensure that any emails sent regarding Council business adhere to the principles set out at the start of the policy.
- Councillors should always uphold the principles set out in the Code of Conduct when replying to or sending emails, both internally and externally.
- Councillors and officers should exercise caution when using personal devices or accounts for Council business and should comply with the Council's IT & Electronic Communications Policy.

9. Recruitment

The Parish Council may use internet searches to carry out due diligence as part of its recruitment process. In these circumstances, the Parish Council will act in accordance with its equal opportunities and data protection obligations.

10. Petitions

The Council welcomes feedback from its parishioners.

If a parishioner feels that their concerns have not been satisfactorily met there is a complaints procedure which is covered in a separate policy.

However, the Council recognises that petitions are one way in which people can let us know their concerns. All petitions sent or presented to the Council will receive an acknowledgement within 10 working days. This acknowledgement will set out what we plan to do with the petition. We will treat something as a petition if it is identified as such, or if it seems to us that it is intended to be a petition.

Paper petitions can be sent to:

The Clerk
Berryfields Parish Council
Roman Park Hall
Sir Henry Lee Crescent
Aylesbury
HP18 0YT

How the Council will accept a petition

Petitions submitted to the Council must include:

- A clear and concise statement covering the subject of the petition. It should state what action the petitioners wish the Council to take.

- The name and address and signature of any person supporting the petition.
- The Council will take into account identifiable signatures of people who provide valid addresses, where they live, work or study in the area and may take into account other signatures.
- Petitions should be accompanied by contact details, including an address, for the petition organiser.
- Petitions which are considered to be vexatious, abusive or otherwise inappropriate will not be accepted.

What will the Council do when it receives any petition?

- An acknowledgement will be sent to the petition organiser within 10 working days of receiving the petition. It will let them know what we plan to do with the petition and when they can expect to hear from us again.
- The petition will be placed on the next Council agenda, and the petition organiser will be advised of this.

Full Council meeting procedure

The petition organiser will be given three minutes to present the petition at the meeting and the petition will then be discussed by Councillors. The Council will decide how to respond to the petition at this meeting. They may decide to take the action the petition requests, not to take the action requested for reasons put forward in the debate, or to commission further investigation into the matter, for example by a relevant committee. The petition organiser will receive written confirmation of this decision.

If your petition is about something over which the Council has no direct control we will consider making representations on behalf of the community to the relevant body.

11. Advertising

Berryfields Parish Council permits advertising across its various channels for charitable/not for profit events or local organisations promoting events to promote health, fitness and wellbeing activities in the Parish (or neighbouring Parishes). Commercial business advertising outside of these guidelines is not normally permitted, unless specifically authorized by the Council.

The noticeboards are owned and maintained by Berryfields Parish Council and as such all decisions it makes regarding the granting of permission for advertising are final.

Community Noticeboard Advertising

As long as adverts/notices meet the below requirements they can be placed directly in the noticeboard by the individual. (The Parish Council reserves the right to remove any information that it does not believe to be suitable or of an acceptable condition.)

- Material placed in the noticeboard must be no larger than A4
- All material must be clearly dated
- If in relation to an event, information must be removed within a week of the event date
- Material appealing for direct fundraising, appeals and collections will not be displayed.
- Where material is not time related, posters and leaflets may be removed after three weeks

- There can be no guarantee as to the length of time that information may be on display
- Notices of a political nature are not permitted.

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