

DITTISHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Incorporating the Hamlet of Capton and the Manors of Bozomzeal and Coombe

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

1. Introduction

Dittisham Parish Council carried out an internal review of its communication tools to assess how effectively it communicates, engages and consults with members of the parish and its wider stakeholder audience. This review highlighted several areas where improvement was needed, one of which was the production of a Communications Statement to set out and make public how it communicates and the methods by which it engages with the Parish.

2. Why Communications is important

Parish councils have an overarching role to play in their area which no other body can fill. In performing a community leadership role, councils can articulate and represent the views and needs of the local community more effectively.

Effective communication leads to improved recognition, respect and awareness. The more parishioners know about the work of the council the more they are likely to trust it to make decisions on their behalf or to ask the parish council for assistance when it is needed. Improved communication between parishioners and the council leads to more informed and therefore more effective decision making and helps councillors better understand the community they represent.

According to Government research polls perceived value for money has the strongest correlation with overall satisfaction when people are asked about their local council's performance. The strongest driver of perceived 'value for money' and the primary driver of resident satisfaction with councils is effective information about what a council does.

By prioritising communications and informing parishioners about the benefits and services it provides, the council is more likely to see higher overall satisfaction levels from parishioners.

Good communication with a wide group of stakeholders external to the parish also helps raise the profile of the parish and attract visitors and businesses as well as funding and events.

3. What we communicate

The council communicates information on its meetings and topical issues and events to Parishioners through its notice board, posters, email and social media. These tools are generally used to inform residents of events or meetings or to highlight changes to village facilities such as the Ham or car parks.

The council's website is a valuable source of information. This includes:

- Contact details, meeting times and specific councillor responsibilities
- Minutes and agendas of previous meetings
- Annual financial audits
- Asset Register
- Information on ongoing projects
- Information on local facilities such as the Ham and car parks
- Council policies, procedures and register of interests

4. How we communicate

How the council communicates with Parishioners has changed with the growing accessibility of the internet, email and social media. They are a valuable addition to physical notices, newsletters or posters. The council has also identified a wide audience of interested stakeholders, who would benefit from being kept up to date, not all of whom are local to the area. (ANNEX 1)

The council aims to ensure that all information communicated is timely, accurate and relevant as well as easily accessible to all Parishioners and stakeholders. Different forms of communication and different tools appeal to different ages, social groups and demographics so the council aims to reflect this and where possible appeal to the widest possible audience. Traditional methods such as the parish magazine, printed newsletters, posters and notices are used alongside the website, email and social media to ensure the council communicates effectively with everyone.

Current communication channels:

- Council website page
- Notice boards for agendas, minutes and notices
- Information email group
- Parish Magazine
- Council meetings
- Councillor interaction in person or by letter/email
- Letter drops within the parish
- Posters

5. Who the council communicates with

The council's primary audience for communications is those who live either full or part time in the Parish, in Dittisham, Capton, Bozomzeal, Coombe and on the farms in between these villages, as well as those who own a business, holiday home or act as landlords within the parish.

In addition, there are a wide range of other stakeholders who are kept up to date on council matters. These include but are not limited to those listed in Annex 1 and include visitors, local clubs and organisations, local and national agencies and trusts and other neighbouring local government bodies.

6. Communications Protocol

The Clerk to the Council has responsibility for overseeing all communications with members of the community and outside bodies on behalf of the council.

All councillors and the Clerk are provided with a council email address which is to be used whenever conducting council business and communication with parishioners and solely for that business.

Should individual councillors be contacted directly by parishioners or others on a specific issue they may refer the matter to the Clerk for assistance or to ask for it to be put on the next agenda for a formal response. However, if they are confident they are responding with information or a position that has already been agreed by the council as a whole, councillors may respond directly themselves. Any information provided, or opinion stated should represent the view of the council as a whole and not that of individual councillors.

All communication, verbal and written, should be courteous, professional and polite and in line with the provisions and obligations set out in the South Hams Parish and Town Council's Members Code of Conduct.

7. Social Media Protocol

Currently the council's social media use is limited to its own Facebook account but could involve any web-based interactive tool in the future.

The Clerk and two appointed councillors have responsibility for disseminating information through social media. All posts should always reflect the council's position/ decisions and in no circumstances should posts express personal opinion or been seen to side with a particular external group or promote individual businesses.

All social media posts should be courteous, professional and polite and in line with the provisions and obligations set out in the South Hams Parish and Town Council's Members Code of Conduct. In addition, all social media use should also comply with the laws of libel, copyright and data protection.

Any derogatory or offensive comments made by the public in response to a council post on any social media will be removed. Councillors are at liberty to set up their own social media accounts but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the council's view. Councillors should not engage in any social media activity which would bring the council into disrepute and 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 colourful language.

8. Media Protocol

Should the council be called upon to respond to a media enquiry, either orally or written, then any press releases, statements or photograph calls should be arranged and issued by the Clerk in consultation with the Chairman. All media communications should represent the view of the Council as a whole and comply with the South Hams Parish and Town Council's Members Code of Conduct.

If approached by the media for a comment or statement individually councillors should immediately notify the Clerk and Chairman. Councillors may then either refer the matter for a response as set out in section 6, or if they are confident they are responding with information or a position that has already been agreed by the council as a whole, councillors may respond directly themselves. Any individual response must remain mindful of the Code of Conduct and any information provided, or opinion stated should clearly represent the view of the council as a whole and not individual councillors.

Should any negative stories appear in the media about the council or individual councillors then the Clerk should approach the author or publication to correct matters of fact only and should not getting embroiled in a public debate.

ANNEX 1

INTERESTED EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER LIST

Visitors to the parish
Local businesses, restaurants and public houses
St Georges Church
Dittisham Sailing Club
Dartmouth Yacht Club
Royal Dart Yacht Club
Other parish Groups such as WI, Ditsum Players, Regatta Committee
Users of the Village Hall and Village Hall Committee
Dittisham Charity Trustees
Local transport companies – ferry and bus operators
South Hams District Council
Devon County Council
Dart Harbour Navigation Authority
National Trust at Greenway Estate
Environment Agency
SW Water
NHS Trust, GP clinics
Neighbouring Parish Councils and Town Councils.