



## **Thurlaston Parish Council**

# **Communications Policy**

May 2021

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|----------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------|
| v1.1           | Keith Boardman | May 2021    | Sep 2024           |
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## **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Thurlaston Parish Council (TPC) with regard to communications both within the Parish Council and with its parishioners.

TPC has obligations to articulate and represent the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

The aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately TPC activities, whilst enabling TPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and other relevant bodies.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications between Council members and third parties.

The principles of these guidelines apply to Parish Councillors, the Clerk to TPC and any official TPC representatives. It is also intended as guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

Separate TPC documents on its Publication Scheme and Data Protection Policy should be used in conjunction with this policy. All policy documents are available for download from TPC's website at:

<http://www.thurlaston-pc.gov.uk>

## **2. Communications - Principles**

TPC is committed to regular and open communications.

Publicity generated by the Council will be appropriate, lawful, cost effective, objective, and even-handed. All communications will have regard to equality and diversity and be issued with care particularly during periods of heightened sensitivity.

Council officers may be approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email. When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk and/or the TPC Chairman will be sought.

Councillors will have their own opinions on issues and may be predisposed to particular viewpoints. Whilst they can express those views and play an active part in local discussions, it is essential they do not predetermine a position or decision in advance of hearing all the relevant information or prior to relevant Council resolutions being made. Councillors must not make up their minds until they have heard any contrary views. It is important that Councillors can demonstrate that, whatever their individual views, they remain open for discussion and persuasion when the Council meets to consider matters and vote on resolutions.

At no time should Councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to explain that they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, some may not be relevant to TPC. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- Refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate;
- Request an item for inclusion on a relevant agenda;
- Investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk/Chairman.

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on Council related matters reflect the decisions and policies of TPC, regardless of the Councillor's individual views on any subject.

Where appropriate TPC will agree its statements for release to other local government organisations or the media.

### **3. Textual Communications**

When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed. Keep communications relevant and concise. Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary.

Compose emails as if they are permanent communications because even when they have been 'deleted', they may still be retrieved and have to be disclosed during legal requests. Emails should therefore be regarded as having the same legal status as hard-copy written documents for the purposes of production, use, retention and disclosure. They are not to be treated as different from paper documents.

TPC internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so. In common with printed forms of communication, email messages cannot be guaranteed to be private and secure: do not print or send confidential, sensitive or personal data unless approved by Council and it is lawful to do so.

Check with the sender of an email if there is any doubt about the authenticity of a message.

TPC recognises the benefits of employing a TPC corporate style on formal communications and it expects its standard document templates and logos to be used. These are available from the Parish Clerk or its ICT Support Officer.

Where there is a requirement to communicate with all households on urgent Council business it will undertake to do so using joint selective paper and email communications. The definitive list of recipients will be taken from the relevant extract from the Rugby Borough Council Electoral Register. The process will be undertaken in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations<sup>1</sup>.

### **4. Recording of Meetings**

The law<sup>2</sup> makes provision for the filming of council meetings (including committees and sub-committees). Where filming or recording occurs, Councillors should be mindful of the Code of Conduct, Standing Orders, any potential infringements of copyright and, in the case of members of the public attending or invited to speak at meetings, individual rights to privacy.

### **5. Parish Council Meetings**

The Parish Council meetings are normally held on the second Monday of every other month, commencing in January each year.

The Parish Council will normally meet in the Thurlaston Village Hall, commencing at 19.00 hrs. At times when the Government prohibits public gatherings then virtual teleconference meetings will be held, such as by using Zoom teleconference technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref: TPC Data Protection and Security Policy

<sup>2</sup> Ref: Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014

Members of the public wishing to address the Council during the formal meeting or wishing to record the meeting must make the Chairman aware of their intention before the meeting starts.

## 6. Village Noticeboard

The following items will be displayed on the village Parish Council noticeboard, located opposite the village bus shelter.

- Parish Council meeting dates for the year;
- Contact details for the Parish Clerk;
- The Parish Council's meeting agenda - which will be posted at least 3 working days in advance of each meeting;
- Details of the Parish Council's Publication Scheme.

## 7. Website

TPC expects its website to become increasingly important as a timely, comprehensive and cost-effective channel. TPC is committed to improving the usability, accessibility and content of the site.

TPC will use best endeavours to ensure online content will be objective, balanced, informative, respectful and accurate.

Wherever practicable TPC will comply with the Government's Accessibility Regulations.

The Parish Clerk will arrange for the meeting agenda and associated papers to be posted on the TPC website. Online document access will be made available at least three clear days before each meeting and draft minutes will be posted as soon as possible after each meeting. Published minutes may be considered approved following the next meeting of the full Parish Council.

In order to comply with the *Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities*, the Parish Clerk will arrange for the annual publication of the following documents no later than 1<sup>st</sup> July each year:

- End of year accounts;
- Annual Governance statement;
- Internal audit report;
- List of Councillor or Member responsibilities;
- Minutes, agenda and meeting papers of the Annual Parish Council meeting.

## 8. Social Media

During 2020 TPC considered establishing official social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. Given the nature of the Thurlaston Parish, TPC decided not to progress formally such services. The primary considerations are as follows:

- For social media services to be useful they need to be reliable, up to date, informed and sustainable. However the resources that would be required to undertake such media presence would not be commensurate with the small nature of the Parish.
- Social media accounts are particularly useful in larger parishes with greater geographical size and larger populations. Typically they contain their own business and leisure activities which warrant frequent (sometimes hourly/daily) communications. Thurlaston, a small rural community, mainly relies on good communications with other external organisations/groups

- such as Rugby Borough Council, which hosts its *Mobile App* and a *Facebook* presence.
- There is a Groups.IO community email service (ThurlastonNet) which provides interactive communications, estimated to cover 60% to 70% of parish households (based on a Dec 2019 survey). There is also a privately-run ‘Thurlaston Warwickshire’ Facebook Group. Both are run privately by the same local resident.

## **9. Annual Parish Meeting**

The Annual Parish Meeting, whilst not a council meeting, is usually convened by the Chairman of the Parish Council and is generally held in May each year. This provides electors with a summary of the activities of the community over the previous year and the opportunity for electors to debate community issues and celebrate local events and activities.

Recommended practice is that the Annual Parish Council Meeting and the Annual Parish Meeting are held on different occasions to avoid confusion.