Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council
Communication Policy

1. Policy and Guidance

1.1. This document has been developed to provide both guidance and instruction to the Parish Council's approach to communications. Instructional elements of the policy are identified in *italics*.

1.2. *This Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council (Council) policy operates in conjunction with existing SMPC Facebook Policy adopted 9th January 2014.*

2. General Communication

2.1. <u>Contact Details:</u>

    2.1.1. *The Council's address, e mail address and telephone number will be advertised on the noticeboards, council correspondence and the website.*

2.2. <u>Written - Letter and email - General</u>

    2.2.1. The following outlines the Council's Acceptable Use Policy regarding e-mail. The Policy has been developed to ensure that all councillors and employees are clear about expectations regarding e-mail in order to protect them and the Council from misuse of facilities and potential breach of the law. The Policy also ensures that the Council's IT facilities are used most effectively.

    2.2.2. Email addresses are provided by the Council to assist councillors and employees in carrying out their work. This applies equally to councillors covering for employees. Use of these services should support Council policies and objectives and reflect the Council's high standards of service.

        2.2.2.1. Emails for parish councillors will be provided in the following format firstname.surname@stratfield-mortimer.gov.uk

        2.2.2.2. Email addresses will only be provided for the term in which an individual remains a parish councillor

        2.2.2.3. Personal email accounts are not to be used to communicate any Parish Council business

    2.2.3. If you are aware of any abuses of this policy they should be reported to the Chairman. If you are uncertain about any aspects of this policy and how it applies to you, please discuss with the Chairman.

        2.2.3.1. Email messages cannot be guaranteed to be private and secure: do not send confidential, sensitive or personal data via email unless approved by Council. Remember that any message you send could potentially be forwarded to others by the recipient.

2.2.3.2. No message should be sent, either internally or externally, which contains illegal, offensive, obscene, racist or abusive material (for example, pornography) or libellous, defamatory or discriminatory material, or material which may bring the Council into disrepute. You are responsible for emails you send. Emails could be used as evidence in a tribunal or other court proceedings.

2.2.3.3. Respect the rights of others when sending emails. Email should not be used to harass or discriminate

2.2.3.4. Be aware that agreements made by email may have the same status as letters or formal contracts. Seek Council guidance before making any agreement by email.

2.2.3.5. If you receive emails from unknown sources and they contain attachments, they should not be opened as they may contain viruses.

2.2.3.6. It is important to keep virus software up-to-date and doing this is the responsibility of the user(s). Any downloaded or copied files must be virus checked first.

2.2.3.7. Ensure that the computers are password protected and that you do not disclose your password to others. Ensure that your screen saver is also password protected.

2.2.3.8. The broadband password should be kept confidential within the Council and changed regularly.

2.2.3.9. Do not use email to transmit material that may infringe copyright or licensing laws

2.3. Written - Letter and email – Parish Council Employees

2.3.1. *Officers will ensure any written correspondence is acknowledged, and where possible, replied to within 5 working days.*

2.3.2. *Letters received by post should be date marked on day of receipt.*

2.4. Written - Letter and email – Parish Councillors

2.4.1. *Groups or individuals who have been given delegated authority to communicate on Council business with external organisations or members of the public must do so in accordance with the agreed terms of reference approved by the Chairman, Parish Council or Clerk. A regular update of progress within the delegated authority will be given to the clerk.*

2.5. Email monitoring

2.5.1. The Council reserves the right to view all emails stored on the Parish Council system

2.5.2. The Council also reserves the right to investigate all emails in connection with disciplinary or audit investigations, including where we suspect that the email system is being misused. Full co-operation will be given if law enforcement or regulatory agencies request information about email or Internet use by an employee if the council is satisfied that the request is for an

appropriate purpose and proportionate, and that disclosure is legal. Information will not normally be disclosed other than in connection with a criminal investigation or pursuant to a court order

2.6. <u>Telephone</u>

2.6.1. ***A record of significant telephone conversations should be made and actioned within 5 working days.***

2.6.2. ***There should be the facility for incoming callers to leave messages on the Clerk's answer machine and the Officers should contact the caller within 2 working days.***

2.7. <u>Noticeboard</u>

2.7.1. ***The village will have two noticeboards where agenda and other information will be displayed within the timescales required to meet the necessary legal requirements.***

2.8. <u>Press Officers</u>

2.8.1. ***The Parish Clerk and the Chair are the Council's nominated Press Officers authorised to issue press releases and newsletter articles.***

2.8.2. ***No member of staff / councillors should issue public statements on behalf of the Council unless pre-approved by the Clerk or the Chairman.***

3. Social Media and Website

3.1. <u>Social Media Definition</u>

3.1.1. 'Social media' is the term commonly given to websites and online tools allowing users to interact with each other in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This interaction can be through computers, mobile phones and other technology such as tablets. Examples of social media websites include:

3.1.1.1. social networking (e.g. www.facebook.com)

3.1.1.2. video sharing (e.g. www.youtube.com)

3.1.1.3. blogs (e.g. www.london2012.com/blog)

3.1.1.4. micro-blogging (e.g. www.twitter.com)

3.1.1.5. message boards

3.1.1.6. wikis (e.g. www.wikipedia.org)

3.1.1.7. social bookmarking (e.g. www.delicious.com)

3.1.2. Currently the only types of Social media used by the council are limited to:

3.1.2.1. Parish Council website

3.1.2.2. Facebook

3.1.3. For Councillors, all types of social media are covered within this policy

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3.2.   Social media may be used to:

  3.2.1.   To publish information about the work of the Parish Council to a wider audience

  3.2.2.   Post minutes and dates of meetings and necessary documents to ensure the Council is meeting the transparency regulations.

  3.2.3.   Advertise events and activities

  3.2.4.   Provide good news stories linked to website or press page.

  3.2.5.   Advertise vacancies.

  3.2.6.   'Share' information from partners i.e. Police, Library and Health etc.

  3.2.7.   Announce new information.

  3.2.8.   Post or Share information from other Parish related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g. Schools, sports clubs and community groups.

  3.2.9.   Refer member of public queries to the Officers and all other Councillors.

3.3.   Social Media – may not be used to:

  3.3.1.   *To enter into online debates on the work of the Council.*

  3.3.2.   *To distribute information to Councillor's on Council business, this will be done by email.*

  3.3.3.   *In the recruitment process for employees or Councillor's as this could lead to privacy, potential discrimination claims and data protection issues with the exception of placing vacancy advertisements.*

3.4. Users of Council Social Media

  3.4.1.   *In addition to the Clerk and the Chairman, the Council will appoint nominated members and/or officers as moderators.*

  3.4.2.   *The moderators will be responsible for posting of all material on behalf of the Council and for monitoring of all content, ensuring it complies with this Communications Policy and the adopted SMPC Facebook Policy*

  3.4.3.   *The moderator(s) will have authority to remove any posts that are not applicable.*

  3.4.4.   *The Parish Clerk is the nominated "Webmaster" to maintain and update the Parish Council Website supported by the Administrative Assistant.*

  3.4.5.   *Councillors should refer members of public to the official website*

  3.4.6.   *All documents posted on the website should be in PDF format - Any exception shall be agreed with the Clerk or Chairman*

3.5. Guidance for Officers on the Use of Council Social Media

  3.5.1.   Officers should know the terms of use on third party websites, e.g. Facebook and take care in posting on any social media website/Facebook.

  3.5.2.   No information should be published that is not already in the public domain, e.g. already available on the Council's website.

  3.5.3.   Information should be factual, fair, thorough and transparent.

  3.5.4.   Officer(s) must be mindful that this information may stay in the public domain ad infinitum.

  3.5.5.   Respect copyright laws.

3.5.6.   Do not publish or report on conversations that are meant to be private or internal without permission.

3.5.7.   Do not reference other organisations without their approval. When you do make a reference, link back to the source where possible.

3.5.8.   Do not publish anything that would not be acceptable in the workplace.

3.5.9.   Officer(s) are ambassadors for the Council and must be cordial at all times

3.6.   <u>Guidance on the usage of third party media in your official capacity as a Parish Councillor</u>

3.6.1.   Councillors will need to think about whether they are acting as a Councillor, or giving the impression that they are representing the Council. The Council has adopted a Code of Conduct which is binding for all members of the Council.

3.6.2.   Recommended actions for Parish Councillors

3.6.2.1.   Set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog.

3.6.2.2.   Keep an eye out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views.

3.6.2.3.   Be aware that the higher your profile as a Councillor, the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network.

3.6.2.4.   Be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a Councillor you are likely to be seen as acting in your official capacity.

3.6.2.5.   Make political points if you wish, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect.

3.6.2.6.   Do <u>not</u> blog in haste.

3.6.2.7.   Do <u>not</u> post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face.

3.6.2.8.   Do not use Council facilities for personal or political blogs.

4. Guidance on the Code of Conduct

4.1.   <u>Nolan Principles</u>

4.1.1.   The Council has adopted a Code of Conduct and if Councillors use social media in their official capacity as a Parish Councillor, or may be perceived to be acting in their official capacity, they should be mindful of the seven Nolan principles of the public life:

4.1.1.1.   Selflessness

4.1.1.2.   Integrity

4.1.1.3.   Objectivity

4.1.1.4.   Accountability

4.1.1.5.   Openness

4.1.1.6. Honesty

4.1.1.7. Leadership

4.2. <u>The Members' Code of Conduct:</u>

4.2.1. Councillors can appear to have 'blurred identities'. Councillors may have a personal social media account where they comment both as a councillor and as an individual.

4.2.2. Councillors must ensure it is clear when they are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where their views are taken as those of SMPC rather than their personal opinion.

4.2.3. How councillors use their online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct.

4.2.4. Councillors must understand that there is a difference between communicating as a member of the council, for example blogging as a councillor or as a private citizen. Communication as councillor will be held to a higher standard.

4.2.5. The key to whether a councillors' online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether they are giving the impression that they are acting as a councillor and that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.