

# THORNDON PARISH COUNCIL

## Communications Policy

### 1. Introduction and Scope

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and provides guidance in the form of a Protocol on Communications.

Thorndon Parish Council articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the local community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

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

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 with third parties.

### 2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable Thorndon Parish Council to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the parish, the district and region.
- be an effective voice of the community
- maintain and enhance the reputation of Thorndon Parish Council
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of Thorndon Parish Council or the parish.

### 3. General Principles

- When writing any communication always assume that it may be disclosed.
- Keep the communications relevant and concise.
- Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary.
- Always write emails as if they are permanent, because even when they have been deleted, they can often be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court of the Information Commission. Internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.
- Information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive information that needs to be respected.
- Always respect the privacy of others.
- Do not write anything in communications that might be construed as offensive or discriminatory.

- Do not make negative comments about an individual, including members of the public, Councillors, employees of the Council or business suppliers.
- Use a Parish Council signature so that it is clear in what capacity you are writing.
- Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.
- If councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure.

## **PROTOCOL ON COMMUNICATIONS**

### **A. Parish Council Correspondence**

- (i) The point of contact for the parish council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the parish council should be addressed.
- (ii) The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- (iii) No individual Councillor or Officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the parish council, a committee, sub-committee or working party. In particular, Councillors and Officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.
- (iv) All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letter headed paper.
- (v) Councillors who have taken on responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall lodge a copy of any such communications with the Clerk.
- (vi) Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (e.g. copy to XX).

### **B. Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Parties**

- (i) Agenda should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision, and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- (ii) Councillors must ensure that they have read and understand any documents for discussion and come to meetings able to make an informed decision or identify information that is required in order for them to do so.
- (iii) Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- (iv) Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.
- (v) A Councillor or employee of the Council must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion on any matter which

has been discussed under confidential items on the Council's or Committee's agenda.

- (vi) A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability or an employee at meetings held in public.

### **C. Guidance on Interaction:**

- (i) Thorndon Parish Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the parish council.
- (ii) All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman of the Parish Council.
- (iii) All comment must accurately reflect Thorndon Parish Council's position on a topic; as adopted in official documents; eg minutes and policies.
- (iv) Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of Thorndon Parish Council or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the council or members of the community.
- (v) Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to legal advice taken before any response is made.
- (vi) Councillors wishing to make 'personal statements' must be clear that:
  - a. their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the views of Thorndon Parish Council;
  - b. other councillors may hold a different view;
  - c. the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by Thorndon Parish Council.

### **D. Councillor Correspondence to external parties**

- (i) As the Clerk should be sending most of the council's correspondence from a Councillor to other bodies, it needs to be made clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the parish council.
- (ii) If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a Councillor, the matter should be referred to the Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain in accordance with the Council's Publication Scheme.
- (iii) A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

### **E. Communications with Parish Council Staff**

- (i) Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the council).

- (ii) No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the council, the Chair of a committee or other meeting, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- (iii) Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the parish council.
- (iv) Meetings with the Clerk or other officers:
  - Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
  - Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer;
  - Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

#### **F. Email communication**

- (i) Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk.
- (ii) Parish Council business should not be discussed in emails between Councillors. All Council business should be conducted in public and any correspondence between Councillors on matters may be published as part of the Council's openness and transparency in decision making.
- (iii) The only exception to F(ii) would be email correspondence in accordance with any Parish Council Policy on Delegation.
- (iv) Emails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk.
- (v) Councillors should acknowledge their emails when requested to do so.
- (vi) No matters relating to staff or staffing matters should be discussed in "round robin" emails. The Parish Council has a duty to be able to provide 3 independent Councillors to review complaints about or grievances from staff and therefore correspondence on staffing matters should be sent to the Clerk or the Chairman of the Parish Council.
- (vii) All email correspondence should relate to Parish Council business and should be written in such a way as to reflect the Nolan Principles of behaviour in public life and the Suffolk Code of Conduct.

#### **G. Other methods of Communication**

- (i) Thorndon Parish Council's page on the village website is to be regularly updated and kept up to date.
- (ii) The council's noticeboard will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information.
- (iii) Brief updates on urgent matters will be submitted on a monthly basis to "Village Life".
- (iv) All agendas and approved minutes are distributed via email to a list held by the local Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator.