

Charmouth Parish Council

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Communication Strategy

Introduction

This strategy sets a framework for council communications. It gives direction for all media, online, internal and external communications activity undertaken by Charmouth Parish Council.

We will use the most appropriate channels of communications to reach our customers including residents, employees, businesses, contractors, public sector partners (Natural England, Environment Agency, Jurassic Coast Team, etc.) and district and county councils.

Communications only works when messages are clear, easy to understand, and through discussion. It's not enough to talk – we also need to be able to listen.

How can the parish council improve communication?

Communication with residents and, to a lesser degree, visitors is a key driver to overall satisfaction with council performance. It is also at the heart of good customer service and effective, meaningful consultation – and critical to delivery of the council's community leadership role.

This strategy sets out the framework within which we can respond to this challenge.

Aims, Vision and Values

Aims

The ultimate aim of our communications is that all staff, residents, partners and everyone who deals with the council will have a clear understanding and a positive perception of our vision, aims, values, services, achievements and aspirations. Our goal must be to achieve high levels of satisfaction and engagement.

Vision

What are we trying to do?

To make its vision come alive, the council must regularly communicate with and influence a wide range of organisations, individuals and partners in a cohesive and co-ordinated way.

We therefore need to ...

- Make the council easy to understand and communicate with;
- Set out and publish the council's plan for the next 12 months, and update this regularly;
- Define and publish the council's longer term strategy;

- Ensure staff and partners understand their contribution through clear objectives, milestones and deadlines; and
- Regularly update the public on council activity, on what has been completed and what is planned / re-planned to make sure people know the outcome of the changes the council makes.

Benefits of the above – they will make people feel better informed, proud to live in Charmouth, proud to work for the council, and to work with it.

Values

Our role is to make sure local people get good outcomes from their services and to understand that it is the quality of the service that matters to local people, not who provides it.

Our focus should be on:

- Providing the infrastructure and services that keep the parish moving and working;
- Striving to search out and develop opportunities that improve Charmouth resident's lives;
- Making decisions that promote long-term sustainability;
- Finding the best, most efficient way of delivering services which satisfy customers;
- Maintaining and developing the council's assets in the most effective way so that they deliver benefits to the community and visitors to Charmouth;
- Living within our budgets.
- Recognising that tourism contributes a significant contribution to Charmouth's economy and supporting this.

Supporting active communities

- We should aim to support and encourage local organisations that bring people together and which can be invaluable in keeping our community alive and also in providing a social opportunity for people to meet each other and contribute to local life.

Where do we want to be?

- Everyone who works for us, everyone who works with us, and the people we serve - all must understand what we are working towards and our priorities.
- Everyone should understand the contribution they can make and how others are playing their part.

Our communications objectives are:

- To secure and strengthen the reputation of the council as the community leader and an effective and efficient provider of high quality outcomes that are focused on our values and priorities;
- To build and maintain a professional corporate identity for consistent and co-ordinated use throughout the organisation;

- To promote the image that the council is supportive, effective, efficient and listens to the public and their needs;
- To ensure that communications are consistent and co-ordinated across all channels to give maximum support to the council's strategic priorities;
- To ensure all staff understand the priorities of the council and feel valued and able to contribute to major changes affecting services they provide;
- To ensure that our communications activities reflect the full diversity of the community and help ensure equality of access to all our services; and
- To use additional communication channels, such as social media, if these can improve the number of parishioners that can be informed of meetings, issues and other matters

How will we achieve the above?

It is important that the council increases its efforts to understand what local communities are saying and to that end:

- The Neighbourhood Plan will involve significant consultation with the community;
- The 2014 Visitor Survey gave us invaluable insight into their opinions of Charmouth but we must continue to focus on their changing needs;
- The Annual Parish Meeting is an opportunity for face-to-face communication between the council and parishioners;
- Consultation meetings are an opportunity dialogue on specific items;
- Working with public sector partners is important to us, e.g. through planning for/and responding to emergency situations such as flooding and working with relevant organisations to create an ongoing Beach Management Plan
- We are also in constant contact with our counterparts within the district council and county council to share good practice and explore joint working opportunities.

Delivering our Communications

The council's reputation is based on perceptions – how people see us and what we achieve.

Managing our reputation means first of all understanding what those perceptions are and then working to improve them as illustrated in the above information. Strong /open communication will be a major first step.

Traditional Media

- We issue press releases to the local newspapers for all issues that we believe our public is interested in, recognising the proven link between the public's sense of being informed and feeling satisfied.

Social Media

- We are embracing new technology and social media platforms as an integral part of our communications channels. We recognise the opportunities that social media can deliver in

terms of engaging with the public using their medium of choice, greater two-way dialogue and the insights that social media can provide.

- Similarly, we recognise the risks of social media and we are updating our social media policy and staff guidelines.

Websites

- We recognise the value of our website as a source of information and we are currently extending this to include meeting agendas (to encourage public participation), sub-committee meeting minutes (to increase public knowledge) and other enhancements.

Internal Communications

- Internal communications play a key role in ensuring that our staff know the council's plans and priorities.
- Employees need to understand how their actions contribute to the overall achievement of priorities and how their behaviour affects the way the organisation is perceived internally and externally.

In particular, our processes include:

- Circulation of meeting minutes to the Works Manager to ensure greater understanding of the council's activity;
- Monthly meetings with the sub-committee chairs and the Works Manager to ensure that council priorities are mutually agreed and incorporated into work schedules;
- Regular briefings and updates to our staff through the Works Manager; and
- All the information staff need on policies, processes and performance

Consultation

- Finally, and most importantly, we are considering ways of improving consultation to help us find out what the people of Charmouth need and want, together with their priorities.
- The Annual Parish Meeting and meetings with council tenants, including beach hut tenants and boat owners have been very beneficial.
- The Neighbourhood Plan process, to commence shortly will include a significant level of public consultation.

Recommendations

1. The Parish Clerk must be kept informed of all issues that involve communication with third parties to ensure that conflicting messages are avoided.
2. A process needs to be agreed whereby communication is consistent across all platforms. One councillor should be Communications Officer who coordinates messages having consulted with other councillors and the Parish Clerk. A deputy would also be needed when this councillor was not available.

3. We should have a social media policy to ensure that this relatively new method of communication is used effectively (see appendix).
4. We should review our current methods of communicating to parishioners to see if adding other channels (e.g. social media) reaches more people.
5. A regular walk-in evening surgery should be held allowing parishioners to speak to a small group of parish councillors. This would allow parishioners issues, concerns and complaints to be addressed in a more personal manner.
6. We must ensure that the Neighbourhood Plan process successfully engages the people of Charmouth in a way that gives everyone the opportunity to contribute.

Social Media Policy - Charmouth Parish Council

Why have a policy?

Social media can bring benefits to the council, particularly for presenting up to date information to the parishioners in addition to using the traditional communication channels.

However, it is important that councillors who use social media in the name of the council do so in a way that enhances the Parish Council and does not bring it into disrepute

A misjudged status update can generate complaints or damage the council's reputation. There are also security and data protection issues to consider.

Online debates can quickly escalate into off topic irrelevancies and can create lasting bad feeling.

This policy is designed to set down a few basic simple guidelines to allow social media to be one tool amongst others that the Parish council can use to disseminate information to the parishioners while avoiding the pitfalls of social media which can be very damaging.

Scope

This policy would cover anyone using a social media account to discuss parish council matters.

- Councillors using social media on behalf of the Council or a Committee, must state that that this is on-behalf the Parish Council or the '*Name*' Committee.
- Councillors using social media in their personal capacity as a 'councillor' are requested to ensure that any posts involving council matters are clearly stated as their views and not the views of Charmouth Parish Council.
- Council staff, other than the Parish Clerk, using social media must only use the systems in their private capacity. They should refrain from commenting on Parish Council matters.

A few basic rules

- **It would be best if one person was in charge of adding posts on behalf of the council, with a deputy to cover when necessary.** Anything that may be seen to be contentious and controversial should be agreed in advance by the relevant committee chair or by the Executive Committee
- **If unsure, don't post it.** Err on the side of caution when posting to social networks. If it is likely to be controversial use another channel.
- **Be thoughtful and polite.** Many social media users have got into trouble simply by failing to observe basic good manners online.
- **Look out for security threats.** People should always be on guard for social engineering and phishing attempts. Social networks are also used to distribute spam and malware.

- **Don't make promises.** Some social networks are very public, so do not make any commitments or promises on behalf of the Parish Council without checking that the council can deliver on the promises.
- **Handle complex queries via other channels.** Social networks are not a good place to resolve complicated enquiries and customer issues. If a parishioner has made contact, it should be further handled via the most appropriate channel — usually email or telephone.
- **Don't escalate things.** It's easy to post a quick response to a contentious status update and then regret it. Always take the time to think before responding, and hold back if they are in any doubt at all. Best practice is not to get into extended backwards and forwards debate on social media. Offer an alternate route to resolving issues.

Social media should be viewed as a tool that can be used effectively in certain situations.

Social media proved very useful and effective when updating the village about the problems the Council had in changing the river course, as an example. The Council has been congratulated by many parishioners in the way it handled a situation which could easily have become more difficult in an information vacuum.

Social media of course is not always the best way to present information to the parishioners and its use should be generally restricted to the dissemination of facts rather than entering or causing debates. Likewise, any responses should be measured and thought through. The internet is the home of the knee jerk reaction and once said, it is impossible to unsay it!

Social media is also useful in directing interested parties to documents published on the council's own website and for giving notice of upcoming meetings to which the public are invited.