



**Communications & Engagement
Policy**
Duston Parish Council



Communications & Engagement Policy

1. Introduction

Duston Parish Council (DPC) strives to engage effectively with all local stakeholders by engaging effectively in partnership working which includes residents, councillors, employees and other stakeholders.

The overall aim is to make Council communications a two way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what we do, while also enabling the Council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and stakeholders.

The Council recognises that other bodies are crucial to the quality of life in Duston; it will strive to maintain working relationships with West Northamptonshire Council, Northamptonshire Police and other bodies.

2. Policy Context

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity ('the Code'). The code is statutory guidance and the Parish Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions. Key requirements include

Publicity by local authorities should:

- *be lawful*
- *be cost effective*
- *be even-handed*
- *be appropriate*
- *have regard to equality and diversity*
- *be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.*

The Parish Council's Standing Order No 22 refer to "Relations with the Press/Media". This Communications and Engagement Policy govern the relations with the Press and Media as referred to in Standing Order 22.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recommended-code-of-practice-for-local-authority-publicity>

3. Aims and objectives for community engagement

Community engagement is concerned with giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions which affect them and their community. To help achieve this the Council will -

- Engage in open dialogue with the community to understand their needs and explain how we will address those needs, using the limited resources available of the Parish Council.
- Strive to ensure that the council is fully representative of its community.
- Ensure that residents know what the council is doing on their behalf.
- Encourage members of the community to influence decisions of the Parish Council in a democratic manner.
- When appropriate, pass on the wishes of residents to other authorities and agencies.

4. Why is communication important?

Achieving the Council's aims and objectives requires good communication with residents, groups and organisations the Council works with, or provide services for. Duston Parish Council through good communication will understand and better meet the needs of residents and the community, whilst also raising the profile of the area and the Parish Council.

5. What should the Council be communicating?

Duston Parish Council aims to externally communicate the following:

- Information about our decisions
- Advice about our services and functions
- Information about the Council's finances
- The work of the voluntary and community sector in Duston
- Public consultations and public inquiries relevant to Duston
- Advocating Duston interests to West Northamptonshire Council and other public sector bodies
- Being an effective voice of the community
- Promoting Duston in a positive way
- The social, environmental and economic wellbeing

6. Who should we be communicating with?

Duston Parish Council's audience is wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents (including hard to reach groups like young people)

- The Press / Media
- West Northamptonshire Council (Councillors & Officers)
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community and potential investors
- DPC Councillors and staff
- Local Member of Parliament.
- Other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)
- Local schools
- Visitors to Duston

7. Defining the Community

The community is all the people living, working or visiting within the Parish boundary, including local groups, local organisations and partner organisations.

8. Methods of Communication

Duston Parish Council will provide information that is accessible, relevant and timely to meet the expectations of the community.

Different forms of communication appeal across different age and social groups and it is important to ensure that the Council considers and uses where possible all options to communicate effectively with everyone.

These are the main ways Duston Parish Council communicates externally:

- Manage the media / press effectively to promote the Council & Duston
- Publishing and distributing a Parish Council newsletter
- Ensure the Council is consistently linked to its services and functions
- Maintaining an up to date Duston Parish Council website
- Parish Council notice boards
- Using Social Media platforms
- Access to Council Meetings

8.1 Media and Press

Councils are accountable to their electorate. Accountability requires local understanding. This will be promoted by the council, explaining its objectives and policies to residents and customers. Councils use publicity to keep the public informed and to encourage public participation. The council needs to tell the public about the services it provides. Good effective publicity should aim to improve public awareness of the council's activities.

The Clerk (or a nominated officer by the Clerk) should be the first point of contact for all media and press enquiries to Duston Parish Council. Any official press release from the Parish Council is to be approved by the Clerk in consultation with the Chair of the Council and if appropriate also the Chair of the relevant Committee. The Chairman of the Council will normally act as the spokesperson in the first instance. In the absence of the Chairman it will be the Vice-Chairman of the Council that will take this role.

Press releases will promote services and corporate decisions of the Council. Likewise, all requests for media interviews should be directed to the Clerk or an nominated officer by the Clerk.

The Clerk will be responsible for Duston Parish Council articles or advertisements in external publications. Information published will be in line with agreed policies and decisions of the Council.

For avoidance of doubt, any individual Parish Councillor(s) may issue their own personal statements to the media but they must be careful to avoid giving the impression that they speak formally on behalf of Duston Parish Council, unless properly authorised to do so.

8.2 Newsletter

From time to time Duston Parish Council may produce a direct newsletter for residents. The production of the newsletter will be overseen by the Clerk and nominated officers. The final version of the newsletter will be approved by Council and/or duly delegated Committee prior to publication and distribution.

8.3 Duston Parish Council Services

The Parish Council will promote its services and functions to the local community. Council communications should seek to inform the public of the positive impact Duston Parish Council has in the community, and to maintain the Council's reputation. There should be a clear link between Duston Parish Council and the services it provides.

8.4 Website

The Parish Council website is the primary source of information on the Council for residents and will be kept up to date with content and routinely monitored.

The website shall contain material that arises from Council business including:

- Agendas and minutes
- Policies
- Factual information about the Parish Council and Parish Councillors
- Reports, Surveys or any other material derived from the Parish Council

The website may also contain:

- Latest Parish News and Local Events
- Details about local Community Groups
- Links to local external (useful) resources
- Links to the relevant local public sector bodies where appropriate.

Any Councillor may submit material for inclusion on the website to the Clerk provided that it is consistent with this policy and corporate decisions of Duston Parish Council. It must also be within any limits of technical feasibility to upload.

8.5 Notice boards

Typically the notice board will contain

- The title of the parish council “Duston Parish Council”
- The name, address, telephone number and email address of the Clerk
- List of Parish Councillors and their contact details
- Agenda for forthcoming meetings
- Minutes of meetings
- Parish Council facilities, services and events

Locked noticeboards are intended generally for Parish Council specific information although consideration will be given by the Clerk to using the space for notices pertaining to activities of interest or other important information relevant to Duston.

8.6 Social Media

Social media can be a useful way to communicate with residents and other local stakeholders. All Parish Council social media channels should only be used for the business of the authority and never for private use. Social media accounts must not be used to share or spread inappropriate content, or to take part in any activity that could bring Duston Parish Council into disrepute.

Public social media posts made by officers or councillors (either officially or in a private capacity) which contain content that is abusive, illegal, prohibited or in any way may cause serious reputational damage to the council or the office of councillor will be subject to appropriate action under the council’s disciplinary or code of conduct policies.

The Duston Parish Council logo will be the authority’s social media profile image.

A generic email account (office@duston-pc.gov.uk) will be used for a lead point of contact.

The Clerk will authorise which officers have access to corporate social media accounts. Officers are encouraged to engage with social media within their day-to-day responsibilities and this includes:

- Details of local events within Duston that may be of interest to residents.

- Sharing photographs from past events
- Notifications about press releases when they are sent out
- Promote the voluntary sector and community sector in Duston
- Progress updates about activities and projects the Parish Council are undertaking.
- Help residents with information relating to Duston or Duston Parish Council.
- Inform residents about news relevant to Duston

Officers will not enter into debate through DPC social media channels. However, points of clarification maybe given.

Some general guidelines for Councillors and Officers when using social media:

- If you are unsure of what you are posting, do not post it. Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important to ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish.
- Be tasteful, civil and polite.
- Don't make promises or raise expectations that may not be able to be delivered.
- Handle complex queries via another channel, such as over the phone, letter or via email.
- Stay on topic.
- Don't disclose personal and confidential information such as home addresses, telephone numbers or personal email addresses.
- Don't post any information that infringes copyright law.
- Don't engage with 'internet trolls'. Don't feed the trolls as they thrive on emotional response to their provocation
- Don't post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or in face-to-face contact.
- Although DPC encourages free speech, it does not tolerate any comments or posts from third party users which encourage hate speech or comments which are hateful, obscene, potentially libellous, derogative, racist etc. Any posts of this nature should be removed or deleted.

8.7 Access to Council Meetings

All Duston Parish Council meetings must be open to the general public and press except in limited defined circumstances where the law requires or allows the meeting to be closed (Public Bodies Admission to Meetings Act 1960). In addition, the Council must allow any member of the public to take photographs, film and audio-record the proceedings, and report on all public meetings.

The Council sets aside time for public participation (15 minutes) during which members of the public may make a representation, contribution, suggestion or ask a question. Councillors with a prejudicial interest in an agenda item may speak during public participation (and then

leave the room when the item is considered). Other than when invited to do so by the Chair, members of the public are not permitted to speak at the meeting as this confuses the roles of councillors, who participate in the meeting, and members of the public who observe it.

A member of the public has up to 3 minutes to address the Council/Committee. If there is a possibility that a large number of people will wish to speak, the Chair will encourage people not to repeat comments made by earlier speakers or ask for a single representative to be appointed. Public participation takes place near the start of the meeting immediately after declaration of interests to make everyone aware if a member has a prejudicial interest. The time for public participation shall be outlined on the agenda. Members of the public are encouraged to notify the Clerk prior to the meeting if they wish to speak.

Neither councillors nor staff are under any obligation to respond immediately or at all to comments or questions made during public participation. Members of the public do not have a right to force items onto the Council agenda. Members of the public should not heckle or otherwise disrupt and must respect the rulings of the Chair.

Seating and copies of the agenda will be provided at all Duston Parish Council meetings for the public and press.

9. Correspondence

Official letters or emails on behalf of the council should normally be sent out under the name of the officer, rather than under the name of a councillor. It may be appropriate in certain circumstances for a letter or email to appear over the name of the Chair of Council, but this should be the exception rather than the norm. Letters or emails which, for example, create obligations or give instructions on behalf of the council should never be sent out in the name of a councillor.

The first 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. Correspondence should be sent to:

Clerk / RFO, Parish Office, Duston Community Centre, Pendle Road, Duston, NN5 6DT
clerk@duston-pc.gov.uk

All communication from Council Officers shall be courteous, timely, professional and appropriate. All Officers are aware that their communication reflects on the reputation of the Council.

Staff will include a 'signature' as part of all email communication so that name, position and contact information is provided.

For both Councillors and Officers DPC email addresses should:

- Only be used for Parish Council business and not personal use.
- Not to be used to register on any shopping or social media site or system that is not Council related.
- Not to be used in connection with running or managing any business for commercial activity.

10. Chairman of the Council

Whilst the word 'Chairman' is the correct legal term (Local Government Act 1972) the Parish Council will endeavour to use gender neutral language. They will be known as "Chair" and "Vice-Chair" respectively.

The Chair of the Council will, in the first instance, be the councillor quoted in official Duston Parish Council media / press releases and interviews.

The Chair of Council will represent Duston Parish Council for all civic and ceremonial functions.

The Vice-Chair will fulfil this role in the absence of the Chair.

11. Councillors

Duston Parish Council has 12 individual councillors. Councillors are also sometimes known as 'members'. There is no provision in law for individual councillor (including Chair and Vice-Chair) to make decisions on behalf of the Council.

It is important not to raise the expectations of residents before a matter has been investigated. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate for a Councillor to deal with the matter in the following ways:

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

Councillors will be given a Parish Council email address which they should use for council business.

Council letterheaded paper may be used by the Clerk when preparing communications from any Councillor if requested but only be used to convey information that has been authorised by resolution of Duston Parish Council and must not be used to convey personal views.

Councillors should be aware their interaction on any websites, blogs, email and social media may affect their working relationships with others. They are advised not to make any derogatory, discriminatory, defamatory or offensive comments about staff, other

councillors, the Council or about the people, businesses and agencies the Council works with and serves.

12. Third Party Information

Information may be received from third parties which the Council could publicise. These should be directed to the Clerk for consideration. Where this information is factual, publicly available, non-confidential and likely to be of interest to local residents the Clerk may publicise it by any convenient means. This must be done in a manner that does not imply support of any particular view.

13. Purdah

In the six week run up to an election (local or general) councils have to be very careful not to do or say anything that could be viewed in any way to support any political party or candidate. This is known as purdah. Publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published by the Parish Council during this period unless expressly authorised by or under statute. The Council will continue to publish important service announcements using social media but will monitor and potentially remove responses if they are overtly political.

14. Flag Flying Protocol

Flags are traditionally flown by the Parish Council for a variety of reasons: to show allegiance, support, respect or to celebrate

Duston Parish Council will fly the Union flag as standard at Duston Community Centre, St Luke's Centre and Duston Sports Centre.



However, the Council will also fly these flags as standard on set dates.

- St George Day (23rd April). Flown the working day before 23rd April and is there for no more than 7 calendar days. At the Clerk's discretion, the flag of St George may be flown to celebrate and support sporting events of significance.



- Armed Forces Day (in June but varies each year). Raised the working day before and is there for no more than 7 calendar days.



- Northamptonshire Day (25th October). Raised the working day before and is there for no more than 7 calendar days.



- Rainbow / Pride Flag. Raised the first working day in June and is there for the month of June except for the 7 calendar days for Armed Forces Day.



When flags are to be flown at half mast, they should be two-thirds up between the top and bottom of the flagpole.

The Union Flag will be flown half mast on the following occasions:

- From the announcement of the death until the funeral of the Sovereign, except on Proclamation Day when flags are flown at full-mast following the proclamation.
- From the announcement of the death until the funeral of a member of the Royal Family styled 'Royal Highness', subject to special commands from the Sovereign in each case.
- On the day of the announcement of the death and on the day of the funeral of other members of the Royal Family, subject to special commands from the Sovereign in each case.

- On the day of the announcement of the death and the day of the funeral of prime ministers and ex-prime ministers of the United Kingdom, subject to special commands from the Sovereign in each case.
- Any other occasions where the Sovereign has given a special command.
- Death of a currently serving parish councillor for 7 calendar days and day of the funeral.
- Death of a currently serving employee of the Council for 7 days and day of the funeral.
- Death of a Duston resident currently serving in HM Armed Forces for 7 days and day of the funeral.

The Council will always be sensitive to the views of all sectors of its community but shall not allow the use of flags for political purposes or for the purposes of advertising.

Requests to fly any flag other than those in agreed list above should be submitted to the Clerk for consideration. The Clerk will consult with Chair of the Council (or Vice-Chair in their absence).

15. Bullying and Harassment Statement

“We treat everyone with courtesy and respect and ask for the same in return. We ask that you treat your councillors and council staff courteously without violence, abuse, or harassment.

Councillors and council staff have the right to carry out their civic duties and work without fear of being attacked or abused. Any behaviour whether that be verbal, physical or in writing, which causes either councillors or council staff to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or threatened, is totally unacceptable.

The zero-tolerance policy includes abuse, aggression or threats made in person, over the telephone or in written communication, including on social media.

The council considers threatening behaviour to be:

- Attempted or actual aggressive, or physical actions made towards any councillor or member of staff.
- The use of aggressive, or abusive language, (including raising of the voice, swearing, shouting or in writing) which threatens or intimidates councillors or council staff”.

This policy applies throughout all Council Meetings, but it also applies to any Councillor or Council Staff away from Council Meetings as well.”

16. Miscellaneous

Communications must not breach equalities, bullying and harassment policies. Councillors must also adhere to the Councillor Code of Conduct.

The Councillors and Officers must not disclose information which is confidential or where disclosure of information is prohibited by law. This includes disclosure to the public of any matter which has been discussed as a confidential item at a Council meeting, or information that has been provided to a councillor in the course of fulfilling their official responsibilities that should not otherwise be in the public domain.