Gnosall Parish Council

Communications and Community Engagement Strategy

Adopted March 2015

Updated March 2018

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Communications and Community Engagement Strategy

The purpose of this Strategy is to help Gnosall Parish Council (GPC) communicate and consult more effectively with local parishioners and all other relevant stakeholders. Some elements of the document have already been adopted as Parish Council policy, but the strategy should also be used as a working guide for effective communication.

As a Parish Council, it is essential GPC engages well with the local community and keeps them informed as to what the Parish Council actually does. As the Parish Council's workload grows, dissemination of its growing role and the work it performs are increasingly important.
Much of this is already being done, but this strategy provides clear guidance on how best to achieve this successfully and ensure that good ongoing communication is maintained.

The Parish Council can do this by: -

- Publishing a regular newsletter
- Maintaining an up-to-date website
- Managing the media effectively to promote GPC

Communication is changing rapidly in the digital era. The Parish Council acknowledges this and the Communication Committee will respond and adapt accordingly.

Although not covered here, it is also crucial that the Parish Council liaise and communicate effectively with other local parishes, Staffordshire County Council and Stafford Borough Council. Likewise, GPC should ensure it maintains good internal communications – making sure staff/councillors are fully informed and giving parishioners consistent messages & representation on behalf of the community.

All information presented about the Parish Council's governance, decisions and activities should be accurate. No confidential information should ever be disclosed.

Community Engagement is about giving local people a voice and involving them in the decisions that affect them and their community. It is about the development of relationships and clear communication to deliver better services and projects. The aim of this strategy is to engage residents and encourage their participation in decision making, in order to secure better services and to create a more active and informed community.

1. Newsletter – GMK

The GMK Newsletter is one of the Parish Council's most important lines of communication with local residents and complements the service provided by the website.

The key aims of the newsletter are to promote the work of the Parish Council positively (including news and upcoming events) and engage with the local community. The publication also seeks to support the work of local voluntary groups and provide relevant information of interest to parishioners, stakeholders and visitors to the parish. The GMK Newsletter does not aim to duplicate other local community publications, such as the GPN.

The Parish Council aims to produce an engaging and informative quality publication, with a wide-ranging appeal and relevance. To reach as wide an audience as possible, it is produced in printed and electronic format.

Frequency of Editions
Because of budget constraints, the GMK is no longer produced on a quarterly seasonal basis, but once every four months: -

i. Spring - March
ii. Summer - June
iii. Autumn - October

Where necessary, additional special 'one-off' editions may also be produced.

Contents and Style
This is the Parish Council's best opportunity to grab parishioner's attention, so the design has to be instantly attractive and kept clean & simple. All news items should answer the six key questions – who, what, when, where, why and how?

Articles need to be kept short, uncomplicated and punchy - with the main point of the item stated at the beginning. Any lengthy sections of text should be broken up into short paragraphs. If readers require more serious and lengthy details then links can be provided to relevant meeting minutes or reports on the website.

Colour photographs are vital as they bring contents to life and should be included with all features where possible. Images need to be large enough to view, complement the text and have captions that describe the activities/item shown. Where appropriate, the photographer or source should be credited. It is also essential that all photographs showing children's faces have the permission of the parents before being published.

Priority is given to specific GPC news – covering updates since the last edition, current reports and forthcoming activities. The back page should include fixed GPC information, such as Parish Office details and contact information for general inquiries.

A regular *Other Parish News* section is situated in the later part of the newsletter to cover any relevant or notable village activities, events or news items. *Other Parish News* is of lower priority than GPC features.

Format
The point size must be consistent and large enough for most people to read. Likewise, the font-type must also be standardized, for example, using *Times New Roman* throughout with at least 50% leading (space between each line) and no more than 100% leading. Printed copies will be reproduced to A4 size paper (matt finish), comprising of twelve pages, folded and stapled at the centre.

A consistent header should be used, incorporating the sub-heading of *Newsletter of Gnosall Parish Council* - with acknowledgement that it covers the wards of Gnosall, Moreton and Knightley. The *GPC* logo should be clearly displayed to make it clear what organisation the publication is from. Likewise, the edition date/title (i.e. Summer 2016) clearly displayed. A harmonious colour scheme should be adopted – ideally comparable to that used for the GPC website or other GPC publications.

Editorial Team
The Communications Committee has helped produce the GMK. In January 2017, a specific GMK editorial team was appointed as a working sub-group to plan and review production of the newsletter.

In conjunction with the Clerk/CSO, the Editorial Group will determine the topics, themes and design for each edition. Features are produced by group members or by other identified contributors – where necessary a group member should be assigned to liaise with contributors to help produce the item.

The Editorial Group and Clerk/CSO will liaise regularly to ensure deadlines are being adhered to and contributed articles/features submitted as planned. During this period designated group members will help edit contributions and with the CSO put together a draft copy with items as agreed by the team. The Editorial Group members will then have an opportunity to edit or comment on the first draft copy at least a fortnight before the publication deadline and any additional draft copies before deadline (as required). The Clerk must see and authorise the final copy before it goes to print.

Each edition will be reviewed by the Editorial Group and feedback analysed. Ongoing appraisal and re-evaluation will be important roles – including consideration of potential new formats/designs and regular assessment of other community newsletters.

Contributors
People asked to write features must be informed as to how many words are required, the perspective/context of the article and be given a clear timescale. If possible, a photograph or internet link should also be provided.

The Editorial Group reserves the right to edit articles and items as necessary.

Planning, Timescales and Deadlines
Producing three editions allows the Editorial Group two months to plan and develop each edition.

This permits time to: -

i. Determine topics/themes
ii. Identify and consult with chosen contributors
iii. Edit draft contributions
iv. Design and produce a final draft copy

The Clerk/CSO and Editorial Group should liaise regularly to ensure that deadlines are being adhered to. The first draft stage involves developing a mock-up of the newsletter to determine the space required. A designated member of the group will receive and edit articles/items before passing them on to the CSO for inclusion.

An assigned group member of the group will then meet with the CSO to help compile the newsletter and carry out any further changes or editing. The draft copy should be checked and proof-read by the Clerk. A draft copy will be emailed to editorial team members before the deadline prior to publication, so feedback can be collated to make any necessary final amendments.

After being sent to print, a proof copy of the printed cover should be sent to either the CSO or group member to check the quality of printing with regards to newsletter photographs and any other images.

Distribution
GPC strives to ensure that as many residents receive a copy of the newsletter as possible. Printed copies are currently sorted and distributed by volunteers to almost 2000 homes in the parish. A further 50 copies are circulated via public outlets throughout the village such as shops, the school, surgery, churches and community halls.

A mailing list (including GPC councillors, local groups and all relevant stakeholders) is maintained and an electronic pdf-format distributed to these recipients as an e-newsletter.

A link for a download copy of the most recent edition will be prominently displayed on the GPC website. Previous editions should be archived under the Publications section for easy access.

Funding
Although there is currently a cost for printing the newsletter (approximately £750 per edition in 2018), this is a fraction of the cost as the GMK is primarily produced and distributed by volunteers. Likewise, the GMK is the Parish Council's most effective communication tool – reaching approximately 2000 households in the parish and is an extremely cost-effective form of interacting with the local community.

Where possible, sponsorship should be secured to cover all printing and production costs. Sponsors will be acknowledged, but strictly have no input into editorial matters.

2. Website

The Parish Council's website is an increasingly important and flexible form of communication for the Parish Council. Digital communications are essential for any parish council and are about more than simply just being seen to have a website.

Growing numbers of people of all ages are using new forms of digital communications and expect the organisations they are in contact with to do the same. The internet is a vital tool for engaging people and getting important messages out quickly and cheaply to a large number of people, 24-hours a day. GPC must ensure its website address is promoted as widely as possible and users can easily find the site on all major internet search-engines/browsers.

GPC should prioritise how best its website can be used to provide access to information and aid the delivery of information. A website is only as good as the information uploaded and the attention afforded to ongoing maintenance. An effective website will require appropriate provision of resources - especially staff & councillors with the necessary skills and time.

Format
A successful website is one where the format meets the needs of GPC and the site's targeted users. This will mean displaying content and updates in a user-friendly format that are easy to navigate. If the site does not meet user's expectations, it is likely they will not visit again. The homepage in particular should be kept simple so that navigation is clear, logical and hierarchical. This format will be reviewed on a regular basis.

Contents
It is imperative that information published is up to date, accurate and relevant - nothing is as off-putting as out of date information. GPC must also ensure it regularly evaluates and responds to user's satisfaction with the website. As with the newsletter, ongoing appraisal and re-evaluation is essential – including awareness of other community website formats/designs.

Maintenance
The Clerk/CSO currently has responsibility for the day to day uploading of information. Ongoing technical support is required by an IT specialist (currently Bob Alker) to implement maintenance, changes and updates. It is essential that an ongoing process is implemented to ensure this system works. Relevant information and updates will be consistently produced and sent by the Parish Council for updating the website. Regular liaison between the Clerk/CSO and IT specialist may be necessary.

Designated members of the current Communication Committee may also have access to upload or change details where appropriate.

3. Social Media

Social media is transforming the way local government and many parish councils interact with local people. Networking sites use online methods to build and link communities to share information about services or events with a range of interested individuals.

Parish Councils and their partners are using social media for a range of purposes. It is not just about sharing updates, but also being used as a way to spark innovation and engage in conversations with local people. Social media is free and relatively easy to use – a powerful tool often requiring no more skill than adding an attachment to an email or creating a word document. This means there are few barriers to entry for sharing information with a potentially wide audience.

The Parish Council can use social media to: -

- provide and exchange information about services
- support local democracy
- gather parishioner insight and manage parishioner interaction
- promote cultural events or tourism
- support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience

The Use of Social Media by GPC

Facebook is currently by far the most popular social networking medium. The Parish Council has recently established a GPC Facebook page which is administered by the Clerk and Communications Committee. The GPC site is used to convey the latest news, updates and links to relevant features. It complements the Parish Council website – utilising the same digital information but reaching a different audience to the website.

Blogging

Social networking can enhance community debates and add positively to local politics - some parish councillors and employees may use their own personal blogs or tweets to share news and information. When doing so, it is important that individuals are personally accountable for their use of social media and do not do so in their specific role as a councillor/staff member or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of GPC. Parish Councillors are also personally accountable when using social media in a separate role or capacity. Any comments should not directly conflict with the views of the Parish Council or an individual's role as a Parish Councillor.

All parish councillors and employees have a role to play in protecting the reputation of GPC and any comments or remarks should not bring GPC into disrepute. It is worth noting that even web links to the GPC website may be taken as an impression that personal networkers are representing GPC.

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4. The Media

Communicating positively via local and regional media is a vital function of any Parish Council. For GPC, engaging with the media is a way of explaining and highlighting the work undertaken on behalf of parishioners. This promotes and raises the profile of GPC and can also defend the Parish Council's interests. A high media profile will also demonstrate how GPC is at the heart of local community democracy.

Journalists
It is important to understand the motivation & psychology of journalists. To establish a good working relationship, it is worth setting up meetings to get to know them and vice versa. It helps to telephone the relevant news or feature editors at local newspapers to find out how to provide information for news and feature stories.

Journalists need a certain proximity to information and facts, but ultimately are in the business of getting stories within tight deadlines. A database should be established of key journalists and editorial staff in the locality who might be interested in GPC stories.

Press Releases
The PR can be the cornerstone to getting any media coverage, so should be presented in an easy-to-read format. To grab journalists attention, a good PR should have an eye-catching title and punchy theme. It must also be written in a style to suit that of the publication or medium the PR is being sent to.

A PR should be no longer than two sides of A4, with the most important aspects coming first, followed in descending order of importance. All PR's should answer what, where, why, when and how has the story happened? If possible, an interesting quote should be used and any relevant attractive images supplied - or the opportunity for a photo-call provided. It may also be useful to make the Clerk or relevant councillor available for interviews or comment. Finally, GPC contact details should be clearly given at the end of the release– clarifying the name/s of relevant parish councillors or Clerks.

The information should be sent to the appropriate local media first. Awareness of the deadlines of all local publications or radio/TV channels is essential. A follow-up call might also be beneficial in securing a successful response or placement.

Speaking to Reporters and the Press
Parish Councillors should liaise with the Clerk or Chairman before taking part in any formal or impromptu interview with the press. This will provide an opportunity to clarify the Parish Council position and the best way to deliver this information. This is relevant whether an individual is being interviewed on behalf of GPC or not. If unable to discuss/clarify the matter beforehand, then parish councillors should always refer reporters directly to the Clerk, Chairman or delegated councillor.

How to Handle a Crisis
There will be occasions when GPC may face a difficult situation or come under particular press attention. In such circumstances it is important GPC agrees on a consistent message to convey

and keeps the media regularly updated. It is necessary to monitor any relevant media output and act quickly to refute damaging errors before they become accepted fact.

In such situations it is important that only the Clerk or Chairman speak directly to the press – unless a councillor is specifically nominated to do so on their behalf. This will maintain a consistent approach and eliminate any opportunity for mixed messages being given. All interaction with the public and press should be truthful and authoritative. Providing background information can help deter misinformation from being circulated. This extends to never using the phrase '*no comment'* as the media will simply go elsewhere and such remarks can lead to suspicion within the local community.

National Media Policy

Filming and recording of Parish Council meetings
NALC has produced a new *Media Policy Example*, following national rule changes regarding the filming & recording of parish/town council meetings - consequent to implementation of the *Openness of Local Government Regulations 2014.*

This informs parish councils how to respond effectively to the new rules, which give rights to the press and public to use modern communication methods such as filming, audio-recording, blogging and tweeting to report the proceedings of Parish Council's meetings.

Anyone recording proceedings is not required to give prior notice to the Parish Council, though good practice suggests that either the Clerk or Chair of the meeting is informed beforehand. Councillors and the public should be aware at all times that the meeting may be being recorded. It is therefore advised that the chairman of each meeting (including committees and working groups) notifies all in attendance that, unless the business is confidential, it may be recorded.

Any filming, recording or photography should be carried out unobtrusively so as not to interfere with the proceeding of meetings. Recorders may be asked to move to a special area in the room so as not to directly interfere with the meeting. Permission is required from the parent or guardian of any child or vulnerable adult being recorded. No confidential items should be recorded for public use.

Gnosall Parish Council should adhere to the recommendations made in this NALC policy.

5. Community Engagement

The Parish Council engages with the community of Gnosall, Moreton and Knightley by understanding their needs and views, and in this way aims to build local trust. GPC recognises that communication and engagement is a two-way process and promotes community feedback and involvement in its activities.

The Parish Council regularly formally consults the community through the following means: -

- Public meetings about major planning applications
- An Annual Parish Assembly, which is usually well attended
- Surveys on specific proposals or projects, e.g. Parish Plan (2011); Neighbourhood Plan (adopted 2015).

There are also a number of other informal ways that communication from parishioners is encouraged: -

- The Parish Office is regularly open to the public twice a week at advertised times, or by appointment at others.
- There is a ten-minute period of public participation on the agenda at the start of every Council and Committee meeting. Where possible GPC aims to hold at least one of its monthly Council meetings in the parish wards of Moreton and Knightly every year.
- Parish Councillors are available to talk to residents and their names and phone numbers are made available on the website, in the GMK newsletter and on parish noticeboards. Councillors are reminded that where they cannot answer questions satisfactorily, they will seek to find the appropriate information and get back to the member of public.
- The Parish Council also engages with the local community and its public events such as the Christmas Lights, Acres Fun Day and activities through G-Fest.

An attitude of continuous improvement and review should be adopted by councillors and officers towards these matters. The Clerk should notify the Council of any comments, complaints or suggestions from the public at the earliest opportunity. The Parish Council should always strive to communicate with hard to reach groups, such as those in rural areas, the disabled, those without internet access, and the young.

6. Other Forms of Parish Council Communication

Posters and Leaflets/Fliers

These provide a cost-effective way of communicating to a particular target audience. When placed correctly, attractive posters can draw viewers to a specific event or alert them of an upcoming activity. A simple message, eye-catching image or catchy slogan can be extremely effective. They can also be strategically located/distributed and seen by most people.

Objective

To be most effective, it is essential to identify the objective of the flier (e.g. what event is being publicised or promoted) and the target audience.

Graphics

Illustration, photographs or artwork help to grabs people's attention, particular for posters. According to research, 70% of people look at the graphic when viewing a poster, while 30% only read the headline, so the image used is most important. Any image used should be of a high quality and fit the message - a cheap or shoddy poster/flier will reflect badly on the Parish Council or the event being publicised.

Headline and Text

The headline should be short, snappy and relevant. It is better to have one or two very strong statements than a long list of text that might dilute the message.

The choice of lettering is important. A poster will need to be easily read from a distance - large, clear lettering is best. Whenever possible, consistency with use of fonts is important. If there is a lot of text, break it up with smaller sub-headings to make it easier to read.

Lay Out

Include the Parish Council name, logos, address, and phone number. This should be prominent enough for people to remember who it was that produced the poster/flier. The address and phone number can be smaller, but should appear somewhere. Simplicity is key – do not have too many different elements vying for the reader's attention. It is important to avoid visual clutter.

Distribution

A list of locations for posters (or recipients for leaflets) should be an early part of the planning process for every event or communications project. Adequate time should be allocated to put posters up or distribute leaflets/fliers to be seen in time by the target audience.

Noticeboards
The Parish Council currently has ten noticeboards located in Gnosall and around the parish. These locations are: -

- The Grosvenor Centre
- Gnosall High Street
- The Village Green
- Brookhouse Road
- Newport Road
- Wharf Road
- Moreton
- Outwoods
- Knightley
- Bromstead

The purpose of the noticeboards is to display notification of Parish Council meetings, events and news. Where appropriate, they are also available to publicise items and events of other relevant community activities. Commercial notices are not normally advertised unless of specific community benefit or relevance. Items for posting are co-ordinated by the clerk and installed by her designated team of volunteers.

Items should be evenly distributed amongst all noticeboards, though in some cases posters may only be of specific interest to particular geographical areas and locations.

Space is restricted within these cabinets, so it is important that notices are replaced when out of date. It may also be necessary to restrict the size of some posters. Noticeboards are kept locked to members of the public.

Interpretation Panels
Where appropriate, interpretation panels have been installed on public open space throughout the parish. The Parish Council developed three interpretation boards as part of the Acres Regeneration project in 2013. These panels are strategically located to maximise views from the visiting public and at important landmarks on the wetland.

These panels are permanent structures, but if possible, the panels may be updated with new displays and information every several years.

Banners
The Parish Council may sometimes develop banners for public events or activities. As with posters, any banner should clearly exhibit the name and logo of the Parish Council.

Roller banners are also an effective tool in raising an organisation's profile and role at events. The design of Parish Council roller banners should incorporate the same above principles of information and layout, whilst ensuring that a professional image is presented.

Annual Report
The Annual Report is prepared for presentation to the public at the Annual Assembly usually held in May. It is presented in the form of a double-sided colour printed folded booklet and it

headed with the parish council logo and mission statement plus the Quality symbol. It contains the following information:

- An introduction detailing the area covered by the parish, council membership and staff, details of meetings and how to find information about them and when the Parish Office is open.
- Reports from the Chairman and Clerk
- Reports from the Chair of each Committee which details the work of the respective committees throughout the preceding year including a financial breakdown from the Chairman of Resources.
- Reports from Borough and County Councillors
- Details of Receipts and Payments (unaudited) at the year end
- Names, addresses and phone numbers of Parish, Borough and County Councillors together with details of Officers and the Parish Office

The Annual meeting usually involves a guest speaker, short presentations from Councillors, short reports from Borough and County Councillors, an opportunity for parishioners to ask questions and concludes with refreshments.

Minutes of the previous year's meeting are presented as well as formal presentation of the Annual Report and questions upon it (if any) and reports on any matter of current importance in the work of the Parish Council.

7. Communications Committee

The Communication Committee has been successful in improving the Parish Council's profile, helping to revamp the website, establish a social media presence and totally transforming the GMK newsletter.

As suggested in the initial March 2015 Communications Strategy, regular Communication Committee meetings were superseded by an editorial meeting specifically for the GMK newsletter and as of January 2017 the Communication Committee meet once every six months instead of monthly. This continues to allow the committee to discuss general communications and community engagement issues and implementation (or updates) of the Communications Strategy. The Committee's T*erms of Reference* will be updated accordingly.

Members of staff and the Communication Committee will be specifically assigned to lead on other forms of Parish Council communication such as press releases, the website and social media.