

Helpston Village and Parish Council Community Engagement Policy

Created – January 15th 2025

Issue 01 (3rd March 2025)

1. Purpose

This policy aims to establish clear guidelines and strategies for facilitating two-way communication between Helpston village residents and the Parish Council. It is intended to ensure that the voices of the community are heard, and that the Parish Council remains responsive, transparent, and accountable to its constituents.

This policy aligns with the principles set out in the Peterborough Parish Charter, ensuring that communication and engagement practices are in harmony with wider governance standards. The Parish Council will ensure that engagement practices evolve based on resident and other feedback, ensuring continuing relevance and effectiveness.

2. Objectives

- To ensure regular, open, and effective communication between Helpston residents and the Parish Council.
- To foster a culture of transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness.
- To encourage community feedback, ideas, and concerns.
- To keep residents informed about Parish Council activities, decisions, and plans.
- To respond in a timely and constructive manner to the concerns and suggestions of residents.

3. Methods of Communication

The following methods will be used to maintain open channels of communication between the Parish Council and Helpston residents:

- **Parish Council formal public meetings:**
The Statutory public meetings will be held once per month. These are formal meetings of the Parish Council to which members of the public and press are welcome to attend. An opportunity to have input is possible, however this is not the opportunity for open debate due to the formal procedure stipulated in the regulations for these meetings.

A Public Forum (in adjournment) is included at the beginning of each meeting to bring any issues to the Parish Council that are not listed on the Agenda. These are noted and brought to the next meeting or an action agreed.
- **Parish Council Surgeries**
These will be held at least once a quarter, where residents can attend and directly engage with at least two Parish Councillors. These meetings are proposed to have time slots to enable residents to raise any issues or concerns

on matters they may not feel comfortable discussing in an open meeting. These are informal opportunities to listen and take back direct questions and feedback. No decision or agreement can be made as it is outside a formal meeting. Where necessary, feedback will be given to the resident on their point of discussion once taken back to Council.

- **Village Newsletter**

A bi-monthly newsletter will be distributed to all households in Helpston. This will include updates from the Parish Council, news about upcoming events, and any other relevant information. It will also provide contact details for Councillors and information on how to raise issues. This information will take the form of a page in each edition of a local magazine.

Any additional, time sensitive information will be published on our website and promoted through email circulation and social media channels

- **Website and social media:**

The Parish Council will create and maintain an up-to-date website and use social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to provide regular updates on Parish Council activities and initiatives, publish Agendas, minutes and reports. These platforms will also serve as a place for residents to ask questions or share feedback. The statutory Code of Conduct states the Parish Council are unable to debate any issues on this platform.

- **Community Email:**

A dedicated email address will be provided for the Clerk for residents to send questions, comments, or concerns to the Parish Council. Emails will be acknowledged within 48 hours, and responses will be provided as promptly as possible.

- **Surveys and Questionnaires:**

The Parish Council will periodically distribute surveys or questionnaires to gather community input on key issues, proposals, or plans.

- **Suggestion Box:**

A physical or digital suggestion box will be available at the village hall and online for residents to submit ideas or raise concerns confidentially.

4. Frequency of Engagement

- **Parish Council Meetings:** These will be held monthly and open to the public. There will be a designated slot at each meeting for residents to ask questions or raise issues.

- **Bi-monthly Newsletters:** Distributed to all residents to keep them informed and involved.

- **Social Media Updates:** Regular updates will be posted to keep residents engaged and informed about ongoing projects, events, and decisions.

5. Two-Way Communication Guidelines

- **Clear and Accessible Information:** All communications will be clear, accessible, and free from jargon. Key information will be provided in a variety of formats to ensure all residents can access it.
- **Listening to Residents:** The Parish Council will actively listen to the feedback and concerns of residents. Feedback mechanisms, including open forums during public meetings, emails, and surveys, will be used to gather a wide range of perspectives.
- **Timely Responses:** The Parish Council will aim to respond to all inquiries within five working days. If a matter requires further investigation or discussion, the Council will provide an update on the progress within 10 working days.
- **Transparency:** When decisions are made or actions taken, the Parish Council will publicise all pertinent information to residents. This includes sharing minutes of meetings, reports, and plans via the website and newsletters.
- **Confidentiality and Respect:** All communications will be treated with respect and confidentiality. Residents will be encouraged to express their views freely and be assured that their privacy will be respected.

6. Community Engagement Protocol

- **Request for Information:** Residents may request information from the Parish Council through email or during public meetings. The Council will respond to requests promptly and ensure that the information is accurate and up to date.
- **Raising Issues and Concerns:** If a resident wishes to raise an issue formally, they may do so via email to the Clerk to ensure a controlled and considered response. The issue will be reviewed by the Parish Council, and the resident will receive a response with proposed actions or updates.
- **Consultation on Key Issues:** When major decisions or projects are proposed, the Parish Council will actively seek input from residents. This may be done through public consultations, surveys, or focus groups.

7. Roles and Responsibilities

- **Parish Councillors:**

Councillors are responsible for actively engaging with residents, attending meetings, and ensuring that feedback is taken seriously. They are also responsible for communicating with residents about Council activities and decisions.

- **Clerk to the Council:**

The Parish Clerk will be responsible for managing and coordinating communications, including maintaining the website, social media accounts, and distributing newsletters. They will also ensure that responses to resident inquiries are timely and efficient.

- **Residents:**

Residents are encouraged to engage with Parish Council meetings, respond to surveys, and participate in the decision-making process. They should feel free to raise concerns, suggest ideas, and ask questions.

8. Planning Policy Awareness

The Parish Council recognises that planning policy plays a crucial role in determining the outcome of planning applications. As a statutory consultee, the Parish Council will ensure that all responses to planning applications are framed in terms of:

- The Local Plan (LP) and its relevant policies.
- The National Planning Policy Framework.
- Our adopted Neighbourhood Plan or other material planning considerations.

To ensure that the Parish Council's responses carry maximum weight, councillors will:

- Be ever mindful of the relevance of planning policies.
- Use their best endeavours to ensure references to planning policies are included, wherever possible.
- Work collaboratively with residents to **highlight planning-based concerns** rather than leaving residents to rely on subjective arguments.

9. Review and Improvement

This policy will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains effective and responsive to the needs of Helpston residents. Feedback from the community is welcomed as part of the review process, and adjustments will be made to improve communication and engagement methods where necessary.

10. Communication Commitment

The Parish Council is committed to fostering a strong, communicative relationship with the people of Helpston. We believe that by ensuring transparent and consistent two-way communication, we can work together to build a stronger, more vibrant, more engaged community.

Approved by Helpston Parish Council

Date: 3rd March 2025

This policy is designed to provide a framework for ongoing, two-way dialogue between the residents of Helpston and the Parish Council. By promoting transparency, accessibility, and responsiveness, the goal is to create a more connected and engaged community. Responsibilities around GDPR will be maintained at all times.