



Communication and Engagement Policy

Adopted on June 19th, 2023

1. The aims of this policy

Fernwood Parish Council recognises its role at the heart of the community and values its unique position in providing community leadership and direction.

The communications strategy laid out in this document sets the standard for engagement both within the council and with its community.

As a council, we aim to ensure communication is two-way; informing people about council activities and village hall, consulting and listening to what people say about services and providing information to support residents. As a council, we are committed to open and transparent communication with residents.

The council aims to ensure that the community understands the role of the parish council as the first tier of local government, its powers, limitations and its liaison with Newark and Sherwood District Council and Nottinghamshire County Council.

The parish council aims to:

- a. Establish clear, easy to use channels of communication between the council and residents and vice versa.
- b. Provide information on important matters in a timely manner to facilitate and encourage informed comment from interested individuals and groups.
- c. Promote Inclusion - all Fernwood residents, businesses and community groups are encouraged to be involved wherever possible in the work of the parish council. The council supports equality of opportunity for everyone in the parish.
- d. Listen to and respond to residents to enable their voices to be heard and for them to take an active role in shaping their local area.
- e. Work together to facilitate the development of the community recognising and supporting the existing groups in the parish and the wealth of experience and contributions people make.
- f. Build trust - the council will work to understand the needs of Fernwood residents, businesses and community groups and collaborate constructively where it can.

2. Legal requirements and restrictions

This policy is subject to the council's obligations which are set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, The Local Government Act 1986, The Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018, and other legislation which may apply to the council's Standing Orders and Finance Regulations.

The council cannot disclose confidential information or information where this is prohibited by law. The council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the council's standing orders, under contract or by common law. Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the Code of Conduct adopted by the council, a copy of which is publicly available at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk. All documents are available on request in hard copy or large print.

3. The main principles for all forms of communication

Fernwood Parish Council will ensure that it communicates with residents in a timely and effective manner, and to inform and consult with them on matters which affect the parish.

All methods of communication should:

- be civil, tasteful, and relevant
- be concise
- not disclose information which is confidential
- reflect the views of the parish council not the individual
- not contain unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, or racially offensive content.
- not promote political parties
- not publicise personal information

4. Methods of communication that may be used by the parish council

- Parish council meetings
- The parish council office
- Parish council noticeboards
- Email
- Post
- Telephone
- Website
- Newsletter
- Social media
- Public meetings

5. Parish council meetings

The parish council meets on the third Monday of every month (except August and December when there is not a meeting). Meetings will normally take place in Fernwood Village Hall starting at 7pm.

All parish council meetings are open to the press and public and will start with a public forum usually lasting up to fifteen minutes (longer may be allowed at the chair's discretion). Residents are encouraged to raise issues during the public forum relating to agenda items or anything else.

Residents, local organisations, district/county councillors, the local press and police will be encouraged to attend parish council meetings and bring forward any proposals or comments they may have. All meeting participants, including invited guests will be expected to behave with civility and respect to all other attendees of the meeting.

On occasion it may be necessary for the council or a committee to exclude the public if the confidential nature of the business to be discussed means their presence at the meeting may be prejudicial to the public interest.

6. Annual Parish Meeting

All town and parish councils throughout England are required by law to hold an annual parish meeting, which must take place between 1 March and the 1 June (inclusive).

The aim of the meeting is to create a two-way flow, both updating residents with reports from stakeholders, clubs and groups that operate in the parish and to encourage engagement, feedback and suggestions from residents.

The chair will convene an annual parish meeting to facilitate the gathering of the residents of the village, with reports from stakeholders, clubs and groups involved in the village and the opportunity for all residents to raise questions and ideas for the village.

7. Parish council office - The role of the parish clerk and responsible financial officer

The parish clerk and responsible financial officer performs a pivotal role as a communications link between the parish council and its stakeholders. It is therefore essential that all forms of correspondence must go via the clerk with the minimum requirement of a copy to the clerk. This will ensure that records are properly kept. The clerk will provide a list of correspondence to committees or full council at meetings. The clerk will respond where required to all correspondence within five working days, either with a full response or with details of when the parish council will consider its response (the exception to this will be during periods of absence).

The office will be open on weekday mornings for residents to call in and speak directly to council staff. At other times and if there is a matter requiring a longer discussion an appointment can be made to meet with the clerk.

Office Address: Fernwood Parish Council, Fernwood Village Hall, Rubys Avenue, Fernwood, NG24 3RS

Office opening times: Monday and Friday 10am-noon
Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday 10am-1pm

8. Noticeboards

Parish council noticeboards will be kept tidy and up to date. The following items will be displayed on the parish council noticeboards outside of the village hall, inside the village hall lobby and on Goldstraw Lane:

- Parish council meeting dates for the year
- Contact details for the clerk
- The parish council's meeting agenda which will be posted at least three working days in advance of each meeting
- Parish council meeting minutes which will be posted in draft form as soon as is practicable after meetings.

9. Correspondence

All correspondence should be addressed to the parish clerk in the first instance either by email to clerk@fernwood-pc.co.uk or by post. Details will be recorded and passed to the relevant person or organisation as soon as practically possible.

Parish councillors also have their own council email addresses allowing residents and other relevant parties to make direct contact. These are published on the parish council website at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk.

All correspondence to the parish clerk will be acknowledged within one week of receipt where possible. If the communication is received by email an acknowledgment will be sent by that means.

Councillors will be notified of correspondence, but the addressee will not be named on agenda packs/minutes of meetings unless requested. Anonymous correspondence in any form will be recorded as received but not responded to.

Email should be thought of in the same way as a letter. A subject line, the sender's name and the content should be in the main body of the email, not as an attachment. Attachments will not be opened unless the clerk has prior knowledge of the subject. Anonymous emails or those with no subject in the title will not be opened or actioned - this is a security measure to protect the council's computers and systems against spam and malware.

A resident may raise any issue directly with the parish clerk or any councillor. If a satisfactory answer cannot be given immediately, the issue may be placed on the agenda to be considered by full council.

The clerk will acknowledge all Freedom of Information requests within seven working days and will reply fully within 20 working days of receipt of the request. If this is not possible, a further holding letter/email will be sent with an expected completion date. Freedom of Information Requests and responses will be published at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk

10. Email

The parish council email account is monitored by the clerk during office hours. Email is a fast and cost-effective form of communication, particularly efficient when reaching out to multiple addressees in a single message. But email should not be used to the exclusion of other forms of communication, for example where a matter could be dealt with more effectively in face-to-face meetings or by phone.

The following guidelines aim to help keep email communications manageable and efficient:

- The clerk will keep councillors updated, by forwarding emails sent to the parish council, when appropriate.
- Some emails which are of general information to the community will be posted on the council and local Facebook pages in addition to being forwarded to the councillors.
- The 'reply all' option will be used thoughtfully, only copying in relevant parties.
- Caution should be exercised when forwarding emails to ensure they go only to relevant people. Think security.
- It is not usually appropriate for draft documents circulated by email to be forwarded outside the parish council unless to an individual directly involved with the matter under discussion.

All parish council business will be conducted using parish council emailing addresses. i.e. staff and councillors will only use their parish council email addresses to send and receive emails regarding council business; personal email addresses must not be used for council business.

11. Post

All post is received by the clerk or administration assistant who will ensure that it is opened promptly and dealt with in an appropriate manner.

12. Telephone

The parish council office telephone will be answered during office hours by the clerk/administration assistant who will deal in a professional manner with all incoming calls. The voicemail system will receive messages when the clerk/administration assistant are not available, or the office is closed. The staff will check for messages each day and return calls promptly where a number has been left.

13. Website

The parish clerk will ensure the website at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk is up to date, including with the following information:

- Schedules, agendas, and minutes of all parish council meetings
- All policies
- Details of any committees and its responsibilities
- Contact details for the councillors and clerk
- Finance Information including annual reports and audit reports
- Details of any significant ongoing projects updated as appropriate
- Details of parish council services

The clerk will arrange for the agenda and associated papers to be online at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk a minimum of three clear days before meetings and for the draft minutes to be posted as soon as possible after the meeting.

14. Newsletter – The Fernwood Gazette

The parish council will publish 4 seasonal newsletters, the content of which will be determined by the council. The schedule for newsletter should be:

- Winter (December)
- Spring (March)
- Summer (June)
- Autumn (September)

Each newsletter at minimum should include:

- Note from the parish council chair
- Updated timetable of events in the village hall
- Articles written by the councillors when relevant (reviewed by clerk/councillors)
- Articles written by local organisations and/or articles written by residents (reviewed by clerk/councillors)
- Developments update
- Photos of the village
- Useful contacts list
- Youth club update
- Relevant stats and figures shared by other parties
- Adverts by local businesses

This will be part funded by the inclusion of advertising by local businesses.

15. Parish council social media

The parish council will use social media sites where it feels this will benefit the public.

Parish council accounts should be the first to make announcements or share decisions, advertise key dates, agendas, minutes, publicise consultations, advertise vacancies etc. This responsibility will lie with the clerk/administrative staff.

In addition to posting on the parish council website at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk, information may also be shared to local Facebook groups. It is both difficult and time consuming to track/monitor comments on social media, so residents requiring clarification, or a personal response should be asked to email clerk@fernwood-pc.co.uk.

The clerk will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory, libellous nature. Such post will also be reported to the hosts (i.e. Facebook) if appropriate to do so.

16. Councillor Use of social media

- a. Should councillors wish to use social media regarding their role as a councillor, it is advised they set up a separate profile/page for their councillor activity.
- b. Any parish councillor who has their own social media accounts whilst free to express their views should use them with caution and always make it clear that their opinions are their own and not those of the parish council.
- c. Councillors can use their own personal social media accounts to:
 - Encourage residents to attend parish council meetings
 - Share parish council posts regarding decisions the council has taken (ensuring they don't duplicate shares leading to overloading local Facebook groups with the same shared post)
 - Advertise events and activities in which the parish council is involved
 - Share information on events and activities which may benefit residents
 - Publicise important meetings such as public consultations
 - Signpost residents to the correct point of contact
 - Advertise vacancies
 - Respond to residents' requests for information on the above
 - Follow the code of conduct
- d. Councillors will not:
 - Share information on council decisions before it has been issued on Parish Council channels (i.e. draft minutes/parish council posts regarding decisions)
 - Share personal or confidential information
 - Engage in personal attacks or hostile communications
 - Post on parish council accounts to share personal opinions
 - Present personal opinions as that of the wider parish council
 - Hide their identify when using social media or responding to residents
 - Publish photography or videos without permission of those included
 - Post content which constitutes bullying or harassment
 - Bring the parish council into disrepute
 - Post offensive language

17. Consultations

The council will arrange consultations and surveys when appropriate and results will be made available on the website at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk and when deemed relevant, on social media.

Methods of consultation will be dependent on the topic and timescales. The Fernwood Gazette will be used to consult when possible but online consultation will be the main conduit for consultations. Notices regarding online consultations will be posted on council noticeboards and these will include details of how to receive a paper copy for residents who are not online. Topics the council is considering will appear on its agendas and minutes and residents will be encouraged to make contact to give their views.

18. Media

Local media is invited to attend all meetings of the parish council and will be provided with an agenda and minutes of previous meetings. The clerk will be the main point of contact for media enquiries and may proactively contact the media if the parish council wishes to provide information or make a statement relating to its business. The clerk will consult the chair, vice-chair, or chair of the relevant committee to clear the content of any press statement before its release. It is important that all information shared with the press is accurate and represents policies and views of the parish council. If a councillor gives an interview or comment, the views expressed should be those of the council and its code of conduct always followed. Information of a confidential nature must never be disclosed.

19. What Fernwood Parish Council asks of residents

To actively review the notice boards and/or the parish council website at www.fernwood-pc.co.uk and/or the local newspaper and/or the Fernwood Gazette for information about meetings and events on a regular basis.

To recognise engagement opportunities and utilise them by responding to surveys, letters, questionnaires etc. Residents' views really do matter and can help shape important decisions about the future of your community.

To address comments, suggestions, or complaints in writing by email, telephone, or post, using the contact information published on the parish council website and displayed on the village notice boards. Alternatively, to attend the monthly parish council meetings (third Monday at 7pm but not August or December) and make use of the public forum at the start of all meetings.