

Innsworth Parish Council

Media, Communications and Complaints Policy

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Adopted 24/7/26

Reviewed:

Next Review Due: 5/27

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that Innsworth Parish Council communicates effectively, consistently, and lawfully with the public, press, and on social media. It provides a framework for councillors, staff, and volunteers to follow when representing the Council.

2. Scope

This policy covers all forms of communication, including:

- Press and media relations
- Website content
- Newsletters, notices, and printed materials
- Social media platforms (Facebook, X, Instagram, etc.)
- Email and digital messaging platforms

It applies to councillors, employees, contractors, and any volunteers acting on behalf of the Council.

3. Principles

All Council communications must be:

- Accurate – based on verified information.
- Respectful – free from offensive, defamatory, or discriminatory language.
- Transparent – open, honest, and accountable.
- Compliant – in line with relevant legislation, including the Data Protection Act 2018, GDPR, Freedom of Information Act 2000, Local Government Act 1986 (Code of Recommended Practice on Publicity), and the Equality Act 2010.
- Professional – reflecting the Council's role as a trusted public body.

Publicity must be lawful, objective, balanced, and non-political. This principle underpins all sections of this policy

4. Roles and Responsibilities

- The Clerk (Proper Officer) is the Council's authorised press and media contact. All official press releases and media responses will be coordinated through the Clerk.
 - Councillors may communicate with residents and the press, but must make clear that they are expressing personal views. They must not present personal opinions as the official view of the Council.
 - Council staff and volunteers/contractors must not make public statements or posts on behalf of the Council unless authorised.
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5. Press and Media Relations

- Press enquiries should be directed to the Clerk.
 - Press releases must be approved by the Clerk before publication.
 - All statements will be factual, balanced, and reflect agreed Council decisions.
 - Confidential information and items discussed in closed session must never be disclosed.
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6. Website, Publications and Notices

- The Council's website is its primary source of official information. All statutory information required by law will be published here.
 - Newsletters, leaflets, posters, and noticeboards should support, not replace, website content.
 - The Clerk is responsible for ensuring that website content is accurate and compliant with accessibility standards (WCAG 2.2 AA).
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7. Social Media

- The Council may operate official social media accounts to share news, promote events, and engage with the community. These accounts are delegated to a specific Councillor to manage within the parameters set out by the Council, eg they should convey the official meeting dates, key points of minutes, agreed actions of the Council and operate within the policies and practices agreed by the Council
- Councillors using personal accounts must:
 - Follow the Code of Conduct.
 - Make clear when views are personal.
 - Avoid bringing the Council into disrepute.
- Content on Council-run accounts must:

- Be factual, non-political, and respectful.
- Direct queries to the Clerk rather than engage in debate.
- Offensive, defamatory, or unlawful comments posted on Council accounts may be removed or reported.

Councillors' use of social media is an extension of their conduct obligations and must align with the Code of Conduct.

8. Conduct and Enforcement

- Breaches by councillors may be referred under the Code of Conduct to the Monitoring Officer.
 - Breaches by staff may result in disciplinary action under the Council's HR policies.
 - Persistent misuse by members of the public may be addressed under the Complaints Policy.
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9. Emergencies and Crisis Communications

In an emergency, urgent communications may be issued by the Clerk (in consultation with the Chair or Vice-Chair if possible). Messages will focus on factual updates, signposting, and reassurance, avoiding speculation or political comment.

10. Monitoring and Review

- The Clerk will monitor the Council's website and social media accounts to ensure compliance.
 - This policy will be reviewed annually or sooner if required due to changes in law, technology, or council operations.
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11. FOI Act

The Parish Council will comply with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 by

- Proactively publish or make available information as required under the Model publication Scheme
- Charges may be made for information provided under this scheme where they are legally authorised, they are in the circumstances, including the general principles of the right of access to information held by public authorities, justified. These charges may include costs of

photocopying,

postage and packaging

the costs directly incurred as a result of preparing information where it exceeds £450 cost calculated at £25 per hour of staff time (eg more than 18 hours)

- The Parish Council will confirm if it already holds the specific information and provide it within 20 working days
- The Parish Council does not need to draft, prepare or publish information it does not already have at the time of the request
- The Officers of the Council can not interpret, explain or pre-empt the decisions of the Council
- The Officers of the Council will signpost or refer to specific information which is already in the public domain
- A person making such a request must provide their name and address and a clear description of the information required
- The request is for any recorded information already held by the Parish Council
- The request should not be likely to cause a disproportionate cost or burden or an unjustified level of distress, disruption or irritation
- Reference is also made to section 14(1) and regulation 12(4) b of FOI relating to vexatious requests

12. Manifestly unreasonable, unjustified or inappropriate requests/Vexatious requests

- The Council will consider the motive of the requester and the value of the information being sought eg is it in the public interest for this information to be sought-The 4 principles for seeking information are

Holding public authorities to account for their performance

Understanding their decisions

Transparency

Ensuring justice

- The Council will consider the cost/burden of dealing with the request eg the amount of staff time, distraction of resources from dealing with other matters,
- Any harassment or distress caused to staff
- The Council would consider it reasonable to expend up to 18 hours of staff time on a request
- The request must not make threats against employees or offensive language be used

- The requester may be demonstrating unreasonable persistence by seeking to re-open a matter or moving the substance of a complaint, or bombarding individual councillors or Officers with parallel complaints on the same issue,
- Actions that the Council may take in the case of vexatious communications include but are not limited to:

Evidence gathering to enable the Council to make a decision

Decision of the Council will be communicated to the requester in writing setting out a Time Bound Review date (usually every 3 to 6 months) and may include frequency caps (eg the communication will be read monthly or a Read and File status

The Council must not ignore new, genuine issues or FOI requests

Complaints

1. Purpose

Innsworth Parish Council is committed to providing high quality services to the community. We welcome feedback and recognise that occasionally things go wrong. This policy sets out how members of the public can raise complaints, and how we will handle them fairly, consistently, and promptly.

2. Scope

This policy covers complaints about the Council's:

- Administration and procedures
- Services provided to the public
- Decisions made by the Council
- Conduct of officers acting on behalf of the Council

This policy does **not** cover:

- **Employee complaints** – managed through the Council's Grievance and Disciplinary Policies
- **Councillor conduct** – referred to the Monitoring Officer under the Local Government Code of Conduct
- **Financial irregularity** – referred to the external auditor in line with audit legislation
- **Alleged criminal activity** – referred to the police
- **Matters already decided by Council** – these cannot be reopened except as allowed by Standing Orders

- **Freedom of Information requests** – handled under FOI legislation

Anonymous complaints may be recorded, but the Council is not obliged to respond to them.

3. Principles

- **Fairness:** complaints will be handled without prejudice
 - **Accessibility:** we will consider reasonable adjustments to support those who need them
 - **Confidentiality:** complaint records will be held securely in line with GDPR
 - **Learning:** complaints will be logged and reviewed to improve services
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4. Informal Resolution (Stage 1)

Many complaints can be resolved quickly and informally.

- Please contact the **Clerk** (or the **Chair** if the complaint concerns the Clerk).
 - We will acknowledge your concern within **5 working days** and aim to resolve it within **20 working days**.
 - If further time is required, we will provide an interim update and revised timescale.
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5. Formal Complaint (Stage 2)

If the matter is not resolved informally, you may submit a formal complaint in writing (letter or email). Please include:

- What happened and when
- Who was involved
- What outcome you are seeking

The Clerk (or Chair) if the complaint concerns the Clerk) will:

- Acknowledge the complaint within **5 working days**
 - Investigate, which may include seeking further information from you or officers
 - Provide a written response within **28 calendar days** (or explain any delay with a revised target date)
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6. Independent Review (Stage 3)

If you remain dissatisfied after Stage 2, you may request an independent review. The Council will seek to provide a fair and impartial process appropriate to its size and resources. Options include:

- **Complaints Committee:** Where numbers allow, a committee of three councillors with no prior involvement will hear the complaint.
- **Full Council (with exclusions):** In smaller councils, the full Council may hear the complaint, provided that councillors previously involved in Stages 1 or 2 do not take part.
- **Independent Person/Body:** Where independence cannot otherwise be achieved, the Council may ask a neighbouring parish/town council, or the Monitoring Officer of the District/Unitary Council, or another independent person appointed by the Council, to review the matter.

Before the meeting/review

- You will be invited to attend the hearing or review (you may bring a representative).
- Both sides will exchange documents at least 7 working days beforehand.

At the meeting/review

- The Chair or Independent Reviewer will outline the process.
- You present your complaint, followed by questions.
- The Council or Clerk responds, followed by questions.
- Both sides may make final comments before a decision is made.

After the meeting/review

- A written decision will be issued within 7 working days, setting out findings and any actions.
- The decision at Stage 3 is final.

7. Outcomes and Remedies

Where a complaint is upheld, the Council will:

- Offer an apology where appropriate
- Explain what went wrong
- Confirm what action will be taken to prevent recurrence (e.g. correcting records, changing procedures, training staff)

8. Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour

The Council is committed to ensuring fair access for all residents and to handling complaints properly, consistently, and fairly. However, the Council reserves the right to take proportionate action if a complainant's behaviour becomes unreasonable.

Examples of unreasonable behaviour include:

- Persistent or repetitive complaints with no new evidence being provided.
- Refusal to accept decisions properly made by the Council.
- Abusive, offensive, defamatory, or threatening communication directed at councillors, staff, or volunteers.
- Abusive, defamatory, or persistent misuse of social media, online forums, or other digital platforms, including behaviour covered by the Council's Media & Communications Policy.
- Unreasonable demands on staff or councillor time, or contact at unreasonable hours.

Possible actions the Council may take include:

- Requiring all contact to be directed through a single point of contact (usually the Clerk).
- Restricting communication to written correspondence only.
- Limiting the frequency of contact.
- In rare cases, declining to respond further while continuing to log the complaint for audit purposes.

Any restrictions will be proportionate, time-limited, and subject to review. The Council will follow the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's guidance on unreasonable complainant behaviour in applying these measures.

9. Recording and Learning

- All complaints will be logged by the Clerk.
- The log will record dates, subject, outcome, and any follow-up actions.
- The Council will receive periodic anonymised reports to identify themes and improvements.

10. Data Protection

All complaints will be managed in accordance with the Council's Data Protection and Records Management policies. Information will be kept confidential and only shared with those directly involved in the process.

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