THE HENNYS’, MIDDLETON & TWINSTEAD PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS &

ENGAGEMENT POLICY

Approved by the Parish Council on: 11th May 2020

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| **Document Control** |  |
| **Author: Parish Clerk** | **Signature** |
| **Approved on behalf of Parish Council** | **Signature** |

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| **Change History** |
| **Version** | **Date** | **Reason for Change** |
| **v1** | **11th May 2020** |  |

The Hennys’, Middleton and Twinstead Parish Council (HMTPC) articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important Parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

The overall aim is to make Parish Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what HMTPC does, whilst also enabling HMTPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

The principles of these Guidelines apply to Parish Councillors and The Clerk of the HMTPC. It is also intended as guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

This document is intended to provide a framework of best practice; to draw together activities and practices which have been developed over the years to produce a closer working relationship with the community it represents. The Parish Council recognises that engagement is a two-way process between itself and its parishioners.

This document is not intended to become a static document but one which will evolve over time reflecting the changes in the community of The Hennys’, Middleton and Twinstead. It is therefore essential that this strategy is subject to review and change at regular intervals.

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1. COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

**KEY AIM – TO COMMUNICATE AND INFORM; CONSULT AND INVOLVE**

The aim of HMTPC’s Engagement Strategy is to continuously improve the way in which the Parish Council communicates, engages and consults with the community and key partners.

To this end all residents should be: -

* Informed of the council’s activities and projects
* Consulted on council’s activities and projects
* Have the opportunity to be involved in the Council’s activities, work groups and projects
* This will result in the views / opinions of the community becoming an integral part of the Parish Council’s decision-making process, improve the services provided by the Council and ensure the Council better reflects the community it represents.

**KEY OBJECTIVE**

* Use consultation to improve the services the Parish Council delivers, to ensure these services reflect the community’s needs and aspirations. To improve the local community for the benefit of all parishioners.

2. COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION STRATEGY

HMTPC will achieve its key aims and objective through the following means: -

**COMMUNICATION**

The Parish Council recognises the need to use different methods of communication to reach all sections of the community, and each method used will include details of how the public can contact the Council. Good communications enable the HMTPC to:

* Better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
* Raise residents’ satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the parish
* Be an effective voice of the community
* Make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people and local subject matter experts.
* Proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the image or integrity of HMTPC or the parish

# 3. WHO IS COMMUNICATING?

**PARISH CLERK**

The Parish Clerk has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies.

The Parish Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business. The Clerk’s duties require both oral and written communication with the community on a regular basis. These communications need to be conducted with courtesy and professionalism at all times.

**COUNCILLORS**

Elected members will be regularly approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. How enquiries from the public are dealt with by Councillors will reflect on HMTPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk will be sought.

Councillors should avoid making any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to HMTPC or its responsibilities. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

* Give factual information and refer the member of the public to the relevant minutes on the Parish website
* Refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
* Request, through the Parish Clerk, that an item is placed on a relevant agenda
* Investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk, including the wording of any response.

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on council related matters reflect the decisions and policies of HMTPC regardless of the councillor’s individual views on any subject.

4. HOW WE SHOULD BE COMMUNICATING

Different forms of communication will appeal to different ages, social groups and demographics so it is important to ensure that within reason, all options for increasing communication and participation are reviewed over time in order to communicate effectively with everyone.

Information technology offers new ways of communicating. At the same time, for many people,

traditional methods – newsletters/leaflets, posters, notices etc. – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

HMTPC’s general communication strategy is supported day-to-day by the Clerk. Routes of communication include:

* Notices on village notice boards
* Online messages via
	+ News posts on the HMTPC website and linked emails to a subscriber group
	+ The HMTPC Facebook page (this can be signposted from any Facebook Group)
* Contributions to local publications
	+ The monthly Look Out parish magazine which also covers the parishes of Alphamstone, Wickham St. Paul and Lamarsh
* Press releases

The HMTPC will continue to explore ways in which communications and engagement can be improved.

**COMMUNICATION – GOOD PRACTICE**

* All communication from HMTPC is courteous, timely, professional, appropriate and reflects the decisions and policies of council;
* All individuals communicating on behalf of HMTPC are aware that every piece of communication reflects on the reputation of HMTPC in the community;

Staff and councillors are ambassadors of HMTPC and this is reflected in all communications. Any communications from HMTPC will meet the following criteria:

* be civil, tasteful and relevant;
* not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive or discriminatory.
* not knowingly contain copyrighted content knowingly copied from elsewhere for which HMTPC does not have permission to use.
* not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
* if official business, or in any case of doubt, communications will be referred to the Chairman or the Clerk of HMTPC prior to release;
* social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

Equally, it is expected that any communications to HMTPC will meet these criteria. The response to offensive material will be that the HMTPC only enters into correspondence if communications meet the above standards.

5. ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

HMTP Council will consult residents, both formally and informally, at every opportunity when making important decisions.

It is also open to receiving representations from members of the public, through telephone calls and emails to the Clerk and individual Councillors.

The Parish Council will also seek to consult with all sections of the community including the traditionally hard to reach sections of the community and the younger members.

**NOTICE BOARDS**

Information about meetings, agendas and minutes will be provided on the Parish Council Notice Boards in the villages. The village notice boards will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information. The number and location of noticeboards will be kept under review. The Parish Clerk will manage all posting of notices to the notice boards.

**NEWSLETTER**

The Parish Council is committed to regularly contributing to the Look Out Parish Magazine which is distributed to a high percentage of houses in the Parish; plus Alphamstone, Wickham St. Paul and Lamarsh. Articles will include information about the activities of the Parish Council as well as contact details for the Clerk, Parish Councilors and other useful numbers for the parishioners.

**ANNUAL REPORT**

The Council is committed to producing an Annual Report which includes a range of information about the Parish Council and will be distributed in the parish via Look Out magazine as well as being posted on the HMTPC website.

Online Presence - Website - [www.e-voice.org.uk/hennymiddletontwinsteadparishcouncil/](http://www.e-voice.org.uk/hennymiddletontwinsteadparishcouncil/) The Website will be used to provide information about the Council’s activities including meeting agendas, minutes and activities as well as information about other organisations in the area that will be of use to local parishioners. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent. HMTPC’s website is to be kept up to date. Currently this work sits with the Clerk but there is no obstacle in principle to this work being shared by Councillors.

All communications should promote the council website and our social media presence. It is important to ensure that links to the website are provided from other key partners, including BDC and ECC.

**EMAIL**

HMTPC councillor emails should be considered to be in the public domain. Councillors should ask themselves before they send anything related to their role on the HMTPC “Would I be happy if this was posted on the HMTPC notice Board?”

It is strongly advised that councillors use a dedicated email address for Parish Council matters to comply with regulations; it is recommended that councillors use an email provided by the Parish Council with the official domain name for continuity, however, this is not compulsory.

hmtpcouncil@gmail.com will continue as the email address managed by the Parish Clerk. Parishioners should be encouraged to contact the Clerk in the first instance unless it relates to a specific topic or for a specific reason for which the Councillor in question is known to lead on.

The Clerk maintains, within the HMTPC website, email addresses of residents who have opted-into receiving email news from the PC. Recipients are given the option to opt into this feature at any time.

Good practice and guidance around use of mail - Councillors are asked to note the following guidance:

# Use of email in discussing Council positions on issues

A core governance rule for all PCs is that decisions should as far as possible be taken in public, including any related debates. HMTPC has made provision for decision-making to be delegated and handled via email in certain specific cases (see Standing Orders section ??), but it is important to note that the scope of this is strictly limited. Councillors should try to refrain from sending views on topics to other Councillors before discussion on topics at public meetings to ensure the transparency of the HMTPC’s decision making process. Rather than bring up a new issue to all HMTPC colleagues, Councillors should write to the Clerk (optionally with copy to the Chair of HMTPC, or of the relevant sub-committee/working group) who will then decide how to take it forward.

The Clerk will make it clear in emails if a matter is for information only. Councillors should refrain from passing comment by email of information-only items as it creates unnecessary email traffic. Where a response is appropriate, still think carefully about sending comments back just to the author of an email rather than replying to all other recipients. Councillor colleagues do not want to have large numbers of unnecessary emails in their inboxes

# Transmission of personal data via email

Councillors, staff, the Council’s contractors and agents shall not disclose confidential information or personal data without legal justification. Personal information will not be stored any longer than the period it is required and being used.

Although it happens only infrequently, email correspondence between members will from time to time include personal data and even sensitive personal data, which needs to be handled carefully. This can arise, for instance, in employment related and complaints correspondence and similar. The key guidance in writing emails in such situation is:

* Be careful when writing communications that include personal data, both in terms of what is said and how it is said. If in doubt, ask yourself whether you (or the PC) would feel embarrassed about your email being made public.
* In addition, where the communication includes sensitive personal data, be extremely careful about who the email is addressed to and err on the side of minimal circulation.
* If in doubt, consult the Clerk.

# Retention of HMTPC-related emails by Councillors

The reasons for giving Councillors guidance in relation to retaining PC emails are a) the basic Data Protection principle of not keeping personal data (which includes personal email addresses) longer than needed for the original purpose; and b) good practical e-housekeeping. On that basis the general guidance is for HMTPC email correspondence that does not contain sensitive information and does not relate to contractual, audit, employment or other similar formal matters (which have specific retention schedules managed via the Clerk), to delete when the issue has been closed, and generally not to retain this kind of PC correspondence for more than one year.

**SOCIAL MEDIA & FACEBOOK**

Please see separate HMTPC Social Media Policy

**MEETINGS**

The Council’s meetings will be advertised on the Council’s notice board in accordance with its statutory duties. Meetings are open to the public and include an opportunity for the public to speak as part of the meeting. The Parish Council has established a distribution list for Council agendas.

Parish Councillors will take into consideration matters raised by residents during the Public Forum part of its Parish Council meetings.

In line with the Parish Council’s Planning Standing Orders all planning applications will be considered by the Parish Council, with decisions regarding responses to the District Planning Authority sanctioned at full HMTPC meetings (scheduled or extraordinary) where the public can comment prior to the meeting and hear the Council’s debate.

HMTPC meets every other month. Meetings start at 7:30pm. The agenda allows the public to raise issues and make representations during the allocated section. HMTPC has a Planning sub-committee, in which all Councillors are members of, and forms working groups as required, whose activities are reported back to the council in the monthly meetings. Their minutes of the Planning sub-committee will be published on the HMTPC website.

An initial draft of minutes is produced by the Clerk and issued to the chairman within 7 days by email for review. Subject to any amendments a subsequent draft is published on the HMTPC website. Minutes are finalised at the next meeting and the finally approved version incorporating any amendments is re-published on the HMTPC website.

Councillors assigned responsibility for an action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall keep the Clerk updated and report back to the next relevant meeting.

**ANNUAL MEETING OR AGM**

Appoint a Chairman in May of each year.

**ANNUAL ELECTORS MEETING OR ANNUAL PARISH MEETING**

Between 1st March and 1st June each year a meeting of the electors is to be held. This is not a Parish Council Meeting. This is a public meeting where the electorate express their expectations and requirements to the Parish Council members.

**WORKING GROUPS**

The Parish Council will invite interested members of the community to join its working groups where appropriate.

**PARTNERSHIP WORKING**

To achieve the council’s objectives, it is essential for the Parish Council/Councillors to support other groups, organisations and individuals within the community to achieve their aspirations.

It is also important that the Council works with other authorities providing services within the area including the principal authority, Braintree District Council, Essex County Council and the Police.

The Parish Council will endeavor to take part in consultation exercises undertaken by the authorities and other bodies that provide services to its residents.

**COUNCILLORS**

The Councillors are well known members of the community and are easily accessible for those residents who wish to contact them. Some are also members of other organisations within the community. This provides a valuable opportunity for Councilors to learn about the needs and aspirations of the area as well as to inform residents what the Council is doing.

Guidance on interaction

* HMTPC Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Parish Council;
* All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman or the Parish Clerk in the first instance. The response may be delegated to another councillor with particular knowledge of an issue, keeping the Clerk and Chairman of HMTPC updated.
* All media comment must accurately reflect HMTPC’s position on the topic, as adopted in documents

e.g. minutes and policies.

* The outcome of all decisions of HMTPC made in an open, public meeting can be quoted and made available to the media via the Clerk.
* The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able speak with some authority, using plain English.
* Councillors should not make ‘personal comments’ which could damage the reputation of HMTPC or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the council or members of the community.
* Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from HMTPC’s Solicitor before any response is made.
* On the rare occasion that Councillors wish to make a ‘personal statement’, they must make clear:
	+ that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of HMTPC;
	+ that other councillors may hold a different view;
	+ that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by HMTPC.

The Clerk and Councillors using the various modes of communication above will naturally seek to enhance narrative content with appropriate photographs and other images where appropriate.

It is vital however that where photographs are taken at events, particularly those involving local schools and children, that images are not published without the permission of those featured. Clearance of such images must be sought, e.g. via the school(s) involved, before they are published. Such clearance can be obtained either by a Councillor direct, or via the Clerk, who should be consulted if in doubt.

**QUESTIONNAIRES**

The Parish Council will seek the views of the residents on significant changes or improvements in the village through the use of questionnaires.

Depending on the subject of the consultation, Councillors may have such questionnaires delivered to each household, made available in the village and other community buildings and or run a consultation event at the village hall or community event. Feedback to the council is essential in improving the service provided to the local community.

**PRESS – MEDIA MANAGEMENT**

HMTPC’s general policy for dealing with the press/media states:

If practical, any releases to the press or other media are to be approved by the Council, but if due to time constraints this is not possible, only the Clerk and/or the Chairman can deal with the press/media on behalf of the Council.

Key points for effective management of media relations:

* Seek to respond to journalists within a reasonable time
* Be helpful, polite and positive (and avoid saying ‘no comment’)
* Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Parish Clerk or the HMTPC Chair.
* Being pro-active includes issuing timely and relevant press releases and pre-empting potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes where possible.

**PUBLICATIONS**

Not yet relevant.

**HMTPC LOGO / BRANDING**

HMTPC may choose to adopt a particular logo from time to time and uses them to brand the PC and the parish. An appropriate logo should be used in all communication material from the council.

6. MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

The Parish Council is aware that increased communications with residents will result in an increased workload and it is therefore important to manage both the increased work load and resident’s expectations.

7. COUNCIL RESPONSE TIMES

The Parish Council will respond to all communications whether by telephone, email or postal letter within 10 working days of receipt of the communication with the requested information or with information regarding actions being taken where appropriate.

8. MEASURING SUCCESS OF THE STRATEGY

For the strategy to be effective it must be reviewed in terms of appropriateness and relevance to the changing HMTP community and also it’s effectiveness.

This can be achieved through monitoring a number of different aspects of the Council’s activities: -

* Responses to council consultations
* Residents contact with clerk and councillors
* Residents attendance to council
* meetings

**REVIEW OF STRATEGY**

The success and effectiveness of the communications and engagement strategy will be reviewed annually.