1.   Introduction

1.1   Penkridge Parish Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders and to do this it is vital that a communications strategy be developed.

1.2   Communications is a complex, multi-dimensional topic and, contrary to popular belief, it is not only about public relations.

1.3   Communications within Penkridge Parish Council include; press releases, the website, direct customer contact, marketing material, consultation, the Annual Parish Meeting, PPC News, and Council documents such as agendas and letters.

1.4   Everyone needs the basics of communications. From answering the phones and dealing with the colleagues, to front line customer service and carrying out media interviews, everyone needs to understand the fundamentals of communications.

1.5   The overall aim is that Council communications should be a two-way process; to give people the information to understand accurately what we do, so they can make informed decisions, and to get information from residents and stakeholders so we can understand their needs.

2.   Why is communication important?

2.1   Local government communications have, over the past few years, increasingly focused on reputation. Better communications lead to recognition and respect, reputation does matter.

2.2   Achieving the Council's aims and objectives requires good communication with every individual, group and organisation we work with, or provide services for.

2.3   An important part of any organisation's role is to ensure that information provided both by and to it is easily accessible, relevant and timely. The Council has to recognise the importance of communication and be committed to developing its own services to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

2.4   The advances made in information technology offer exciting new ways of communicating. At the same time, for many people, traditional methods such as newspapers, telephone and leaflets still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

3.   What should we be communicating?

3.1   Research by MORI, an independent research organisation and the Local Government Association, states that the most important drivers of council reputation among local residents are:

- o   Perceived quality of services overall
- o   Perceived value for money
- o   Media coverage
- o   Direct communications
- o   Council performance
- o   Clean, green and safe environment
- o   Positive experiences of contact with council employees

3.2   If the Council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its communications strategy.

There Is Also A Need For Proactive And Reactive Information:

- o   Proactively – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
- o   Reactively – giving residents information they want to know

4.   With Whom should We Be Communicating With?

The Council's audiences are wide and varied but include:

- o   Residents
- o   Council staff
- o   The media
- o   Staffordshire County Council
- o   South Staffordshire District Council
- o   Police
- o   Voluntary groups and organisations
- o   Local businesses
- o   MPs
- o   Visitors and those who work in the village

5.   Our Aims And Visions

5.1   The Parish Council's main aim through communications is to benefit residents, partners, employees, stakeholders and visitors, which will:

- o   Raise residents satisfaction, trust and confidence levels
- o   Raise awareness of services provided by the Council
- o   Raise the profile of Penkridge for business and tourism
- o   Support elected members in their role as community leaders
- o   Make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people
- o   Proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the integrity of the Council
- o   Respond appropriately to suggestions, concerns and complaints

The aim is that our residents will:

- o   Know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect from us
- o   Feel confident and satisfied with our services, and their costs
- o   Understand how to get involved with, or influence, our work

6.   Existing Communication Methods

Methods include:-

- o   Website
- o   Council agenda papers/letters
- o   PPC News - bi-monthly
- o   Annual Parish meeting

   o Invitation to the public to attend council meetings
   o Invitation to the local press to attend full council and committee meetings, which may then be reported in the local press
   o Interaction of Councillors with constituents
   o Direct Customer contact
   o Satisfaction questionnaires

7. **Planned Communication**

7.1 The Council will aim to deliver core actions which, if achieved, will have a marked impact on the organisation's reputation and the perceptions of residents.

 These are:

   o Manage the media effectively to promote the Council
   o Carry out regular consultation
   o Maintain and develop the Parish Council's website

7.2 The Council will also ensure that all communication activity takes into account the differing accessibility needs of all, regardless of culture or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, gender, disability, age, sexuality, geographical location or any other status.

8. **Manage The Media Effectively To Promote And Defend The Council**

8.1 The media plays a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital. The Communities and Local Government report found people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local media.

8.2 Issues can arise quickly and often call for a swift response. It is the responsibility of the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Council to respond on issues of direct press involvement.

8.3 In order to ensure clear and consistent reporting of the views of the Council in situations where Councillors or employees are approached for views of the Parish Council, any comments, opinions and views should be discussed with the Chairman or if not available the Vice Chairman of the Council. All enquiries from the media should be directed towards the Chairman or if not available the Vice Chairman of the Council.

8.4 Such messages to the press should be representations of the Parish Council's position on the subject and not those of individual Councillors. If no policy or position exists the Councillors representing the views should state this is so.

8.5 When dealing with the press and/or media, Councillors shall not, in their official capacity, provide oral or written statements or written articles to the press or other media though personal comments may be made once identified as such. All official written statements should be issued by the Parish Administrator.

 Key points for effective management of media relations are to:

   o Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time
   o Be helpful, polite and positive
   o Never say "no comment"

- o   Ensure any responses to hostile enquiries are cleared by the Chairman or if not available the Vice Chairman of the Council and keep written records of responses to journalists
- o   Monitor response times to media enquiries and evaluate media coverage
- o   Ensure the appropriate council spokesman is fully briefed and available for interview if required
- o   Remember there in no such thing as 'off the record' where journalists are concerned.

9.   Publish A Regular Council Newsletter To Inform Residents

9.1   Research shows that there is a direct link between how well informed the public is about council services and how satisfied they are with them. Therefore by regularly communicating with our local residents we can engender a more positive ethos and people are more likely to feel that the Council offers value for money and provides a good quality of service.

9.2   Regular communication with the electorate also fulfils part of the Communication and Community Engagement criteria for Quality Council Status.

10.   Carry Out Regular Consultation

10.1   The Council is committed to consulting local taxpayers, service users, local businesses, service providers as well as staff and members, to identify ways in which we can improve the services we provide.

10.2   Consultation is a key part in the communications strategy as it is a two-way exchange of views between local people and the Council. Council should be keen to get people's opinions about both the future of Penkridge and the services we deliver. This will help to make informed decisions and allow the council to tell people about why we provide services in the way we do.

10.3   At present, most of the Council's consultation is by way of questionnaires and members interaction with the public.

11.   Maintain And Develop The Council Website

11,1   The Parish Council already has a website which is regularly updated and contains key information about the Council and important events. The Council frequently review and monitor the website ensuring good quality up to date information is readily available to the public.

13.   Internal Communications

13.1   Staff play a crucial role in building a council's reputation. Whether they are frontline staff or officers representing the council externally, the way they behave and how they talk about the council can have a huge impact. Good internal communications are therefore very important in helping a council achieve its objectives.

13.3   There are currently no formal internal communication channels in place within Penkridge Parish Council. A monthly staff meeting is undertaken on the first Monday after the Full Council meeting and this is used to disseminate and collect ideas/knowledge/suggestions etc. to and from staff.

One to one communication with staff is used where appropriate.

14.   **Evaluation**

14.1   It is extremely important that the Council measures the success of this strategy so that it may inform any future plan.

14.2   What can we measure?

- o   Raised awareness of the Parish Council and the services it provides
- o   Attitudes towards PPC
- o   Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes

How will we do this?

- o   Consultation with residents by perception and satisfaction surveys
- o   Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content
- o   Hits on website
- o   Staff feedback