



# Websites for Parish Councils

## Why your Council needs a website

The internet is becoming an integral part of our society, and there is a growing expectation that information from all kinds of organisations can be found online.

A website would offer your citizens a simple means of finding out what your council is doing, and is a way of communicating with a wider public. It is important that the website is accurate and presents up-to-date views and information.

Your website could be used to:

- Provide information 24 hours a day
- Improve contact with the council
- Publicise meetings, issues and events
- Gain feedback from the community on local issues
- Improve access to services, directing users to the correct contacts
- Provide information for visitors and tourists
- Raise awareness of the important role of the council
- Meet legal requirements for publishing council information

The responsibility for maintaining the website could be given to one person (e.g. the parish clerk for councils) or shared by several members of your organisation.

## Benefit: Connect with your community

A website would improve communication between your organisation or council and the local community, firstly through being a way of publishing local information.

The website could enable the local community to give feedback, either through an online form or via discussion forums. Feedback forms are more direct and private. Discussion forums are interactive and open to the whole community.

Websites can also be used for surveying the opinions of local people – asking specific questions to get the answers you need.

There are many examples of how forms, forums and surveys could be used, such as: planning applications; local topics of interest or concern; provision of new services; parish plans; publicising emergency procedures; campaigns.

## Benefit: Connect with other council members

A website could include a closed 'members area', which is available to members for sharing information and discussing issues.

This area could be used to:

- Invite members to contribute to agendas; approve minutes and agendas; discuss agenda items and other issues
- Provide additional information on issues; offer personal views and opinion
- Provide contact details; communicate between committees
- Distribute draft versions of documents

## Benefit: Save time and money

A website would provide enquirers with instant access to information, which would reduce the number of day-to-day enquires that have to be handled personally. The information would be available 24 hours a day, allowing access whenever is convenient for the enquirer, particularly useful for visitors or tourists.

Information could be added, appended or deleted instantly, ensuring that the web site is up-to-date and accurate.

Dissemination of information online would reduce the time and costs of printing and posting, and save paper. Documents could be instantly published, and available at the users' convenience.

The website could also direct the local community to the councillors dealing with specific issues. If an issue is not the responsibility of your council, it could point community members to the correct local or central service provider. This would save the local community time, as well as the council.

## Benefit: Contribute towards achieving Quality Status

Information on Quality Status is available on the website of the **National Association of Local Councils**: "In order to achieve Quality Status, parish and town councils must demonstrate that they have reached the standard required by passing several tests."

These are:

- Electoral Mandate
- Qualifications of the clerk
- Council meetings
- Communication and Community Engagement: "Councils will be required to have a website which provides a list of council members and officers, details of how they can be contacted and which also provides access to the annual report."
- Annual Report
- Accounts
- Code of Conduct
- Promoting local democracy and citizenship
- Terms and Conditions
- Training

Councils with good websites are seen as responsible and in-touch with their communities. A website could help a council strengthen its role within the community by gathering community wishes and acting as a voice for the local area. It could also help local citizens help the council. Websites could also act as a reference point for local services, and enhance relationships with other local councils, principal authorities and community and voluntary sector organisations.

The council could publish the agenda and minutes of Council Meetings, the Annual Report, Accounts, Code of Conduct, Terms and Conditions and Parish Plan on the website for information and scrutiny. Using discussion forums and surveys on the website could be a means for local citizens to assist with the Parish Plan and contribute to the Annual Report.

Using the website for two-way communication with local citizens could help to reinforce the electoral mandate; would contribute to community engagement; and could help to promote local citizenship.

## What should be on your website?

Content would need to be relevant, easily found, accurate and up-to-date. The main categories that should be included are:

- About the council: responsibilities and contact information, including emails and phone numbers – signpost this information as About Us or Contact Us
- Councillor names and responsibilities
- Other relevant organisations' responsibilities and their websites or contact details
- Transparency Code for smaller authorities, if relevant

- Parish plan, policy and reports
- Meeting dates, agendas and minutes
- Latest news and upcoming events
- Current issues
- Planning
- Any frequently asked questions (FAQs)
- Any useful links

The website could include other features, such as:

- Guest book, discussion forum, or feedback form
- Surveys
- Regular parish newsletters, or online version of the parish magazine
- Directory of local businesses
- History and environment of the parish
- Document library
- Photo gallery
- Games, quizzes and puzzles

## What should NOT be on your website?

The website should not contain any copyright images or text. If someone complains, it is easier just to remove it. Be aware of what is being said on any discussion forums, and remove anything that is libellous or likely to offend. You may want to approve comments before they are posted.

You should not post any of the following on the part of the website accessible to the public:

- Confidential information
- Commercially-sensitive material
- Party-political comment from councils or councillors

If your website has a 'members only' area then this sensitive information should reside there. Remember to think carefully before you post draft agendas, minutes or reports. When drafts are approved, they can be moved to the public area.

## Managing your website

There are three phases to a website: the initial development, maintenance and promotion.

- During the **development**, it would be useful to form a group of interested parties within your organisation. These would help with the brief for the website, and contribute content and images. There should be a clear decision-making process. If you are engaging a web developer, one authorised person should be designated as the contact with the developer, to avoid confusion.
- Website **maintenance** includes keeping content on the site up-to-date and creating fresh content. It is important to ensure: meeting dates are correct; minutes of meetings are posted as soon as possible; names and contact details are correct.

- It is vital that you tell your community about your website: its address, and what it provides. There are many ways of **promoting** your website, but the main things to think about are who you want to reach (e.g. local citizens, visitors and tourists, former residents, council members), and how best to reach them.

It is useful if the control of your website resides with more than one trusted person. This would ensure that there is never too much expectation on one individual, and provides a back-up if one person moves on. The parish clerk will often be one of the people to take on this responsibility, but if no one on the council feels confident to do this, then you may find enthusiastic local volunteers can help you.

As your website grows, you may find it helpful to designate responsibility for different areas of the site to relevant individuals. You may decide to have a website group/committee, or to discuss website content as part of your regular council meetings.

Please call on **Websites Ahoy!** if you need any advice.



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