SHARLSTON
Parish Council

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION POLICY

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR) place legislative requirements on all public authorities, including local councils. The laws established the legal Right to Know; a presumption in favour of public access to information held by public authorities, subject to certain exemptions; and other measures to improve public sector transparency.

1.2 The Council is obliged to provide information:

- Through a publication scheme
- In response to requests made under the general right of access.
  When responding to requests, there are set procedures that the Council needs to follow. These include:

    - The time limit public authorities are allowed for responding to requests.
    - The fees or amount that public authorities can charge for dealing with requests. Public authorities are not obliged to deal with requests if the costs of finding the information exceed a set amount known as the appropriate limit.
    - Public authorities need not comply with vexatious or repeated requests. (See Appendix 1 for some of the indicators that the Council will use to identify a vexatious request).

The Act also recognises that there are valid reasons for withholding information by setting out a number of exemptions from the right to know, some of which are subject to a public interest test.

2. POLICY STATEMENT

As part of a society where information rights and responsibilities are respected by all, Sharlston Parish Council will aim to move away from the need for individual freedom of information requests and complaints towards a culture of routine, proactive and substantially increased transparency on the part of the Council, by:

- Being open and transparent and endeavouring to provide the public with access to the official information that it holds, as a matter of course.
- Making people aware of their rights to access the official information the council holds.
- Making as much routine information as possible available through the Council's Publication Scheme and website.
- Providing reasonable advice and assistance to applicants for information, including pointing applicants to possible sources of the information they seek if it is not held by the Council.

3. DEALING WITH REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

3.1 Members of the public have a general right of access to information held by Sharlston Parish Council, specifically:

- To be told whether or not the information is held by the Council, and
- If it is, to have the information communicated to them.

Note: There are certain exemptions and limitations to this general right, but just because a document is marked "Confidential" does not automatically mean that it is exempt information, although it may be covered by certain exemptions. Each case will be dealt with on its merits.

3.2 Requests for information must be in writing, must give the applicant's name and return address and must describe the information requested in such a way that we are able to locate it. A written request includes an e-mail. (For environmental information, the request does not have to be in writing.)

3.3 All requests for information will be logged on a record sheet.

3.4 Receipt will be acknowledged but if it is possible to respond with the information requested, this will be done instead. If further information is required in order to locate the information requested, this will be undertaken as quickly as possible.

3.5 All correspondence, phone calls, e-mails etc., that follow the original request will be recorded.

3.6 The Council has 20 working days in which to deal with a request for information. If it is not clear what information is required, the 20-day period does not begin until clarification is received from the applicant as to exactly what is required. (For environmental information, the response period is extended to 40 working days for information that is complex and bulky.)

3.7 A charge will be made for the photocopying of information requested as follows:

- 10p per single A4 size sheet (20p for colour).
- Additionally, postage will be charged at cost.
- If the cost of finding, sorting and editing the information requested is more than £450 then, under the FOI Act, the Council does not have to provide the information. (Under EIR, environmental information cannot be refused on the grounds of cost)

3.8 Any requests for information that is not contained in the Publication Scheme will be passed to the council Clerk to deal with under the FOI Act. A certain amount of guidance on dealing with requests is held by the Clerk, but it may be necessary that further specific guidance will be required from the Information Commissioner's Office. If a member of staff is unsure as to whether a request for information is routine or not, they will refer to the Clerk as certain personal information is covered by the Data Protection Act.

3.9 The applicant will be kept informed at all stages of the process of supplying the information requested, particularly if it is a complex request, when guidance may have to be sought from other agencies.

3.10 If a request is refused, the refusal notice will give the reasons for refusing the request and advise the applicant as to their rights of appeal – both internally by way of a complaint and,

following that, by way of an appeal to the Information Commissioner.

4. APPEAL PROCESS

4.1 If the information requested cannot be supplied, the reasons for this will be communicated to the applicant immediately. The applicant has the right of appeal against the refusal, initially to the Council, but ultimately to the Information Commissioner.

4.2 Any initial appeal will be made to the Council, it will be dealt with by elected members, in accordance with the Council's Complaints Procedure. If the original decision not to supply the information is upheld by the Council, but is still not accepted by the applicant, then the applicant is able to appeal to the Information Commissioner.

4.3 Reasons for refusing information must be in accordance with the respective provisions of the legislation, including consideration of the public interest test where this applies.

6. REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed every year (or earlier if required by changes to legislation or additional documentation) and amended as necessary based on good practice or evidence taken forward.

Approved by Sharlston Parish Council on 1st June 2020 and reviewed on 2nd June 2025

Signed: *Cllr P Belbin* *E King*
Chairman Clerk

APPENDIX 1

Some of the indicators to be used by the Council to identify whether a request for information is vexatious (ICO Guidance – 'Dealing with Vexatious Requests').

Abusive or aggressive language

The tone or language of the requester's correspondence goes beyond the level of criticism that a public authority or its employees should reasonably expect to receive.

Burden on the authority

The effort required to meet the request will be so grossly oppressive in terms of the strain on time and resources, that the authority cannot reasonably be expected to comply, no matter how legitimate the subject matter or valid the intentions of the requester.

Personal grudges

For whatever reason, the requester is targeting their correspondence towards a particular employee or office holder against whom they have some personal enmity.

Unreasonable persistence

The requester is attempting to reopen an issue which has already been comprehensively addressed by the public authority, or otherwise subjected to some form of independent scrutiny.

Unfounded accusations

The request makes completely unsubstantiated accusations against the public authority or specific employees.

Intransigence

The requester takes an unreasonably entrenched position, rejecting attempts to assist and advise out of hand and shows no willingness to engage with the authority.

Frequent or overlapping requests

The requester submits frequent correspondence about the same issue or sends in new requests before the public authority has had an opportunity to address their earlier enquiries.

Deliberate intention to cause annoyance

The requester has explicitly stated that it is their intention to cause disruption to the public authority, or is a member of a campaign group whose stated aim is to disrupt the authority.

Scattergun approach

The request appears to be part of a completely random approach, lacks any clear focus, or seems to have been solely designed for the purpose of 'fishing' for information without any idea of what might be revealed.

Disproportionate effort

The matter being pursued by the requester is relatively trivial and the authority would have to expend a disproportionate amount of resources in order to meet their request.

No obvious intent to obtain information

The requester is abusing their rights of access to information by using the legislation as a means to vent their anger at a particular decision, or to harass and annoy the authority, for example, by requesting information which the authority knows them to possess already.

Futile requests

The issue at hand individually affects the requester and has already been conclusively resolved by the authority or subjected to some form of independent investigation.

Frivolous requests

The subject matter is inane or extremely trivial and the request appears to lack any serious purpose. The request is made for the sole purpose of amusement.