WHPC
West Hill Parish Council

# Communications Policy

Policy adopted – 1st Jun 2021 , Min 21/014

**Policy Statement:**

This policy is intended to help councillors and council staff to make appropriate decisions about the use of all forms of communication with residents, the media and other relevant organisations and businesses. This includes verbal and written communication and the use of social media and the Council's own website.

This policy outlines the standards that the Council requires councillors and staff to observe when using any form of communication whilst conducting the business of the Council, and the circumstances in which the Council will monitor and the action to be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

This policy supplements and should be read in conjunction with all other policies and procedures adopted by the Council, such as the Members Code of Conduct, Data Protection Policy, Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures and such like.

This policy does not form part of any contract of employment and it may be amended at any time.

**Who is covered by the policy:**

This policy covers all individuals working at all levels within the Council, including all elected and co-opted councillors, the Clerk to the Council and any other employees and volunteers that the Council may employ (collectively referred to as staff in this policy).

**Scope of this policy:**

The Council has a corporate presence on the web and utilises email.

Over time, the Parish Council may decide to add to the channels of communication that it currently uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Communications Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements that it uses to communicate with people who live in, work in and visit the Parish. The Council will

always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. We may ask those who contact us for their preferred channel of communication when we deal with them.

All members and staff are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality and interests of the Council, its services, employees, partners and community.

Serious breaches of this policy by employees may be dealt with under the Employee Disciplinary Procedure. The Council may take disciplinary action in respect of unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or racially offensive comments by the employee.

Breach of the policy by volunteers will result in the Council no longer using their services and, if necessary, appropriate action will be taken.

Behaviour required by the Members' Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Members must bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply. Remarks are easily withdrawn, apologised for and forgotten when made verbally, but posting them on the internet means that they have been published in a way that cannot be contained nor removed. Online content should be objective, balanced, informed and accurate.

Members must be aware that their profile as an elected or co-opted councillor means that it is more likely they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking via Social Media, even when this is not the case. It must be remembered that communications on the internet are permanent and public. For example, when communicating in a '*private*' group or forum/chatroom, members should ensure that they consider how the Council would be viewed should that statement or comment be made public.

**Council Correspondence**:

The point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence to the Parish Council should be addressed.

The Clerk should deal with the correspondence and will ensure that information or direct enquiry is passed to Councillors as appropriate.

No individual councillor or officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council, a committee, sub-committee or working group.

All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using letter headed paper.

Where correspondence to a councillor is copied to another person the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

Where the Clerk or a councillor wishes fellow councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information should be circulated via the Clerk.

**Communications with the Press and Public:**

The Clerk will discuss press reports, or comments to the media with appropriate councillors or the Chairman. If the Chairman is absent the report or comments will be discussed with the Vice Chairman.

Press reports from the Council, its committees or working groups should be from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.

Unless a councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be recorded as their personal view.

When responding to Social Media comments/statements the same should apply by advising that this is a personal view and not necessarily the view of the Council.

If councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with in accordance with the Council's adopted Complaints Policy.

**Councillor Correspondence to external parties:**

As the clerk should be sending most of the Council's correspondence from the Council to other bodies, it needs to be made clear that a councillor's communication is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Parish Council.

If it is an operational or other matter the Clerk should respond by delegated authority as the Proper Officer.

Where after discussion with the Clerk a councillor wishes to pursue an initiative on an unofficial/individual basis they are welcome to do so but should be mindful;

a) The need to take care not to give the impression that the initiative has the support of or represents official Council Policy;
b) The dangers of public or other partners or external bodies expectations;
c) Publicity or media coverage which may reflect on the Parish Council.

Accordingly, Members should make it clear that they are acting in an unofficial/personal capacity.

As a general rule, individual members should not approach another body, statutory, voluntary or commercial organisation, other than in a personal capacity if seeking information which might be related to any Parish Council function. Such approaches should be made formally by the Clerk on behalf of the councillor in an official capacity.

If a Member is dissatisfied with the actions/advice of the Parish Clerk, she/he may ask for an item to be included on the agenda for a Council meeting or appropriate committee.

A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or councillors role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and be noted on the correspondence "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware the Clerk has been advised.

**Social Media:**

The Council will encourage the use of social media for the purposes of:-

- Providing and exchanging information about services;
- Supporting local democracy and improving community engagement;
- Gathering citizen insights and managing citizen relationships;
- Promoting cultural events or tourism for the area;
- Supporting community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience;
- Creating internal communications, learning and development

**Guidelines for use of Social Media and other Web platforms:**

Staff and councillors must not allow their interaction on any websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others. They must not make any derogatory, discriminatory, defamatory or offensive comments about other staff, councillors, the Council or about the people, businesses and agencies that the Council works with and serves.

Posts must not contain anyone's personal information other than necessary basic contact details.

If staff or councillors blog or tweet in a personal capacity they must not act, claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council. They should not include web links to official Council websites as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council. Use of the prefix Councillor or Cllr. is disallowed as this gives the outside observer the impression that the author is acting on behalf of the Council.

All staff and councillors must ensure that they use any Council funded or provided facilities appropriately. If using a Council-provided website, blog site or social networking area, any posts made will be viewed as made in an official capacity. Do not use Council facilities for personal or political blogs.

The Clerk will be responsible for posting and monitoring of the content on Council pages and ensure compliance with the Social Media Policy. The Clerk will have authority to immediately without notice or comment, remove any posts from the Council's social media pages if they are deemed to be inflammatory or of a defamatory or libellous nature. Such posts will also be reported to the hosts (i.e. Facebook/Twitter) and also to all members of the Council.

The Council will appoint a nominated '*Webmaster*' to maintain and update the Parish Council website. This will usually be the Clerk. The website may be used to:-

- Post notices and minutes of meetings;
  Advertise events and activities;
- Post positive community news stories;
- Link to appropriate websites or press page if those sites meet the Council's expectations of conduct;
- Advertise vacancies;
- Retweet or 'share' information from partners, such a Police, library, district & county council etc.;
- Announce new information appropriate to the Council;
- Post or share information promoting bodies for community benefit such as schools, sports clubs and community groups;
- Post other items as the Council see fit;
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Facebook, Twitter and/or other online platforms may be used to support the website and its information as above.

Staff and individual parish councillors are responsible for what they post. They are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address which is used

for Council business. Both staff and councillors are strongly advised to have separate council and personal email addresses.

All social media sites in use should be checked on a regular basis to ensure that the security settings are in place.

When participating in online communication, staff and councillors must:-

- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent;
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council;
- Never made false or misleading statements;
- Not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. They must protect the good reputation of the Council at all times;
- Be mindful of the information posted on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council;
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud'. Use sentence case format, not capital letters, and do not write in red to emphasise points; Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks.
- Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief should not be published on any social media site;
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications;
- Not post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face;
- Never name an individual third party unless you have written permission to do so;
- Seek permission to publish original photographs or video from the persons or organisations in the video or photographs before they are uploaded. You must check that there is parental permission before photos of children are used;
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents;
- Never post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations such as libel and copyright;
- Spell, and grammar, check everything;

Residents and councillors should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate;

If a matter that is raised in any form of social media needs further consideration by the Council, it may be raised at either the open forum or as full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of councillors. Again the 'poster' shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case and invited to contact the Clerk direct. Any response agreed by the Council will be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

Reports of any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites or on websites that become known to the Council should be reported to the Clerk for referral to the Council for review and consideration as required.

This Policy will be reviewed annually.