

Communications Policy

1. Introduction and Scope

Weston under Penyard Parish Council (WUPPC / the Council) 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 purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and provide guidelines.

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

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications between council members and with third parties.

Social Media and Electronic Communication policy is included within this policy.

The principles of these guidelines apply to Parish Councillors, the Clerk to WUPPC and any other staff. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable WUPPC 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 and local area.
- be an effective voice within the community
- maintain and enhance the reputation of WUPPC
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the reputation or integrity of WUPPC or the parish

It is imperative that all communication is handled with courtesy and professionalism and that everyone, be it the Clerk, Councillors or staff, respond to any communication within a reasonable period of time.

3. Who is Communicating?

3.1 Proper Officer

The Proper Officer (the Clerk) has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies. The point of contact for the Council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Council should be addressed.

The Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business.

All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letterheaded paper or email address, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Council.

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

Council letterheaded paper or email address must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the Council and must not be used to convey personal views. Council letterheaded paper or email address is used by the Clerk and authorised staff in the day to day running of the Parish Council and its interests.

3.2 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 WUPPC.

Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

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

At no time should Councillors make 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 WUPPC. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- request an item on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on Council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of WUPPC, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject.

The Chair or Chair of Finance, Administration and Communication will agree any statements for release to the press and social media.

Council letterheaded paper or email address may be used by the Clerk when preparing communications from any Councillor if requested but must only be used to convey

information that has been authorised by the Council and must not be used to convey personal views.

Emails received by the Council's Proper Officer, staff or Councillors may be disclosed following a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or following a subject access request under the Data Protection Act 1998, under the General Data Protection Regulation or in the course of legal proceedings.

3.3 Guidance on interaction:

All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman or the Parish Clerk (see Section 8).

If appropriate, for a specific issue, the Chairman may authorise another councillor to make a statement on behalf of WUPPC.

All media comment must accurately reflect WUPPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.

All decisions of WUPPC made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media.

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 WUPPC 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 WUPPC's solicitor before any response is made.

Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement' to the media must clearly inform the media that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of WUPPC, that other councillors may hold a different view and that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by WUPPC.

4. General Principles

When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed. Keep the communications relevant and concise. Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary.

Always write emails as if they are permanent because even when they have been deleted, they can often still be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court or the Information Commissioner.

Even if emails are marked private or confidential, they might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.

Information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive information that needs to be respected.

Always respect the privacy of others.

Do not write anything in communications that might be construed as offensive or discriminatory.

Do not make negative comments about an individual, including members of the public, other Councillors, Officers, or business suppliers.

If writing externally, use a Parish Council signature so that it is clear in what capacity you are writing.

Always copy in the Clerk to any external communication so that a file copy can be kept plus copy in other Councillors as appropriate.

5. Social Media and Electronic Communication

5.1 Email

WUPPC recognises that email communication is an important information and communication system which is used during the course of Council business.

The email policy applies to all Councillors in their correspondence with members of the public and / or other Councillors and the Parish Clerk.

Use of email is encouraged as it provides an efficient system of communication.

The following guidelines for email use should be observed by all councillors:

- use appropriate language and plain English to avoid unintentional misunderstandings
- respect the confidentiality of information contained within emails, even if encountered inadvertently
- check with the sender if there is any doubt regarding the authenticity of a message
- do not open any attachment unless certain of the authenticity of the sender
- keep the email message relevant and concise
- do not send unnecessary copies of the message or forward it on to others if not strictly necessary
- do not 'reply all' when responding to email correspondence unless everyone really needs to see the response
- emails must comply with common codes of courtesy, decency and privacy
- before sending an email, think about its purpose and consider if it is the best form of communication to use. For example, a telephone call or a face-to-face discussion might be more effective
- always write emails as if they are permanent, because even when they have been deleted, they can often still be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court or the Information Commissioner
- forward emails received from members of the public to the Parish Clerk, for inclusion and discussion at the next Council meeting.

5.2 E-mail etiquette.

- Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk or any Councillor
- Reasons for urgency for any reply should be stated clearly
- Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk
- E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk
- Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

5.2 Social media

WUPPC does not currently have a social media presence. If the Council decides to operate Social media accounts, the provisions of this policy shall apply equally to any social media content.

5.3 Website

The website is the primary means of public communication for the Council. It is the duty of the Clerk along with any other authorised editor of the site to maintain the site to be both up to date and accurate. Anything posted on the site must be in line with Council decisions and policies.

Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.

Newsletters sent to subscribers of the website newsletter shall be produced in accordance with this policy.

6. Correspondence with external parties

All correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed to the Clerk. Councillors should forward any correspondence received to the Clerk.

No individual Parish Councillor should initiate new commercial agreements or obligations with any contractor unless specifically authorised by the Parish Council to do so, and normally any such communication would be through the Clerk.

Where a contractual relationship exists with a supplier, day to day communications on routine matters may be carried out by appropriate Councillors provided that they (a) do not incur additional unauthorised expenditure for the Parish Council and (b) do not extend the scope of work already agreed by the Parish Council. In all instances, copies of correspondence should be shared with the Clerk.

If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a Councillor, the matter should be referred to the Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain.

7. Communications with Parish Council Staff

Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the Council).

No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the council, the Chair of a committee or other meeting, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.

Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Parish Council.

8. Contact with the Media

The purpose of a press release or newsletter is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. The Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman or other authorised Councillor, is responsible for issuing formal press releases on behalf of the Council.

Proactive media releases may be issued to promote a decision or work of the Parish Council.

Reactive press releases may be prepared and issued in response to a specific question or as a rebuttal to an article already published. Such statements should be dealt with in a timely manner.

Unless a Parish 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 any views they express are personal and not necessarily those of the Council.

Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.

Letters or articles representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Parish Clerk unless they have been specifically approved by Council. If Members choose to express their own opinions on Council matters, they must make clear that the views put forward are those of the individual Member and not representative of Council policy.

Members and the Clerk should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

9. Noticeboards

The village noticeboards will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information.

Parish noticeboards are intended generally for Parish Council specific information although consideration will be given to using the space for notices pertaining to activities of interest or other important information.

10. Parish Council Logo

The Parish Council's logo is used as a brand to identify WUPPC and the parish. The logo is owned by WUPPC and can only be used with the Parish Council's express permission.