

West Buckland Parish Council

Communications Policy

INTRODUCTION

There is a distinction between Councillors and the Council itself.

All Councillors are actively encouraged to engage with the residents of the parish and, where appropriate, to give their individual views on issues. They must, however ensure that they make it clear that unless there is clear decision of the Council or a policy which has been agreed by the Council they are speaking as an individual.

Members of the public may wish to ask a Councillor to take up an issue. The Councillor, however, cannot commit the Council itself to any particular course of action. The Councillor may refer the matter to the Council or, if it is a matter for which the parish council is not responsible refer the person concerned to a more appropriate body or, indeed, pass the issue themselves to assist. In that instance the Councillor is acting as an individual. There may be instances where the individual Councillor does not feel it appropriate to pursue an issue. In all cases the Councillor is encouraged to keep the member/s of the public informed.

If any member of the public wishes to communicate with the Council itself or for the Council to take up a matter of concern the most appropriate means of communication is by email to the Clerk.

The Council recognises that with the development of social media and instant news there are pressures from certain sources demanding instant response to comments and opinions. Official responses on behalf of the Council can only be provided by the Clerk, or in the absence of the Clerk, the Chair of the Council.

POLICY STATEMENT

This policy is intended to help members of the public understand how the Council communicates with them and all forms of media. It is also intended to assist councillors and council staff make appropriate decisions about the use of all forms of media. The Council's communications will be open and honest in dealing with the media.

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

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

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 oriented or racially offensive comments by an 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.

The council may take action in respect of unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive comments by a member of the community which may result in the person being referred to appropriate authority with the prospect of legal action.

WHO IS COVERED BY THIS POLICY?

This policy covers all individuals working at all levels with the council, including all elected and co-opted councillors, the clerk to the council and all other employees and volunteers (collectively referred to as staff in this policy).

GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC

In accordance with Standing Order 22 all requests from the press or other media, for an oral or written statement, or comment from The Council shall be processed in accordance with this policy.

- The purpose of press releases is to increase public awareness of the Parish Council's activities. All press releases must be produced by the Clerk, (Or in the absence of the Clerk the Chairman) who will, if appropriate, consult parish councillors individually, or the Parish Council as the corporate body.
- Proactive media releases will be issued to promote a decision or work of the Parish Council.
- Reactive press releases will be prepared and issued in response to a specific question or as a clarification to or rebuttal of an article already published. Such statements should be dealt with in a timely manner.
- Information bulletins (which are posted on the website, the Parish Council's Facebook page and noticeboards) will be used when it is necessary to provide vital information to the public very quickly; for example, the comments by the Parish Council on a specific planning application.
- Other press releases will report the decisions and outcomes of the Council's activities, and explain the reasons for them.
- The Clerk will be responsible for clearing all press reports, or comments to the media, in consultation with the Chair of the Council.
- The media will on occasions attempt to by-pass the Clerk; however, it is essential that all communications are co-ordinated and managed through the Clerk. Where parish councillors are contacted direct by the media, they should refer them to the Clerk.
- The Parish Council occasionally works with partners, mostly from the public sector, and in these circumstances, their contribution should be acknowledged.
- Press reports from the Parish Council, its committees or working groups shall, in general, be sent from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- In addition to the Clerk, the Chair, or in their absence, the Vice-Chair shall be authorised

to speak to representatives of the media in respect of Parish Council matters, where specifically authorised so to do.

- Unless a Parish Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, Parish Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that any views they express are personal and request that this be clearly reported as their personal view.
- Unless a Parish Councillor is absolutely certain that he/she is reporting the view of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view. The only clear way of being aware of the Council's view is if the matter has been discussed at a Parish Council meeting, and a decision made on that item.
- It should also be noted that on occasions, the most effective strategy is not to respond to the media.
- Press releases will not be used to comment on national political debates unless of specific relevance to this Parish Council.
- All media releases issued by the Council will include a quotation from the Chair (or, in their absence, the Vice-Chair); if it is not possible to contact the Chair or Vice-Chair, the Clerk will attribute a quotation to the Chair.
- The Clerk will be the first point of contact for the media; however, where it is appropriate for an elected Member to represent the Parish Council, the Chair or Vice-Chair shall be authorised as the official spokesperson for the Council.
- Individual Members will not be permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council.
- In the restricted period before an election, commonly known as "purdah" media releases will not include quotes from Members who are due for re-election; this is mainly of relevance to the Borough Council, but it is helpful for parish councillors to be mindful of the provision.
- Remember: One of the key principles of communication is to also communicate when there is nothing to report. Do not create a hiatus between one action and the next. Your audience needs to know the reasons for non-action.

PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

- The first point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed. It is also the Clerk who issues all official correspondence in the name of the Parish Council, using Council letter-headed paper.
- The Clerk will deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- No individual Parish Councillor should communicate direct with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship unless agreed otherwise by the Parish Council. All enquiries should normally be through the Clerk.
- No individual Parish Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council (or its committees/sub-committees).
- Parish Councillors do not have a right to obtain confidential information/ documentation unless they can demonstrate a "need to know".
- 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.
- Correspondence sent on behalf of the Parish Council to the District or County Councils shall also be copied to the District or County Councillor.

PARISH COUNCILLOR CORRESPONDENCE WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES

The Clerk sends out the Council's correspondence to other bodies, and correspondence from individual Parish Councillors should be avoided; however, there may be exceptional situations when it is appropriate for a Parish Councillor to issue correspondence in his/her own name. Such correspondence must be authorised by the Parish Council and the correspondence must make it clear that it has been written in an official capacity and has been authorised.

SENSITIVE CORRESPONDENCE

There may be occasions when a member of the public contacts a councillor or the Clerk on a sensitive matter pertaining to Council business and the correspondent requests that they remain anonymous for fear of abuse or reprisals. In such case the councillor or the Clerk may raise the issue with the Council to be dealt with accordingly, but the original correspondent retains the right to anonymity.

AGENDAS FOR PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS

In accordance with Paragraph 1 (4) (a) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, agendas will be published no later than 3 clear days before a meeting (this excludes the day of publication and the day of the meeting – Saturdays are included within this calculation). Where the Clerk or a Parish Councillor wishes fellow councillors to receive matters 'for information only' in respect of items on the agenda, the Clerk should be copied into the correspondence.

Note: This applies to items on the agenda only. Parish Councillors are entitled to share any other information they wish, with their colleagues. In these circumstances, it can be helpful for the Clerk to be copied in.

COMMUNICATIONS WITH STAFF

- The Council only employs one member of staff, the Clerk. Members and the Clerk need to be conscious of the employer/employee relationship and ensure that professional standards are maintained at all times.
- Emails: Instant replies should not be expected as the Clerk's contracted hours are worked flexibly throughout the week Monday to Friday; any reasons for urgency should be stated.

COMMUNICATION BY EMAIL

It is recognised that Email has replaced many traditional forms of communication. Set out below is the etiquette adopted by the Council regarding the Council's use of email. This has, in the main, been extracted from Debrett's.

- Councillors and staff are reminded that an Email may be stored permanently and that there is no such thing as confidentiality in cyberspace.
- Delicate communications should therefore be sent by other means, and the writer must think carefully before hitting 'send' if the message is written in haste or when emotions are running high.
- Avoid sarcasm and subtle humour unless you know that the reader will 'get it'. If in doubt, err towards the polite and formal, particularly where you are not well-acquainted with the recipient.
- Think carefully about using smiley faces, 'kisses' etc. Are these symbols really suitable for the recipient? They are certainly not business-like.
- Using capital letters is email 'shouting' and should be avoided. Use sentence-case format. If you want to emphasise something, try underlining or using italics.
- Aim to stick as closely as possible to the conventions of traditional letter-writing. Close attention should be paid to spelling and grammar, and the habit of writing in lower case throughout should be avoided, particularly for proper nouns.
- A well thought out subject line will ensure that the message gets the attention it deserves. Do not reply to such an email on a different subject, without changing the subject-line as this causes confusion for the recipient who may well store e-mails in an electronic subject-folder.
- Emails will often be printed and filed, and therefore close attention must be paid to layout. Again, treating the construction of an email just as you would a 'real' letter is the most effective approach. Where there is more than one recipient, list them alphabetically or, in the business environment, according to hierarchy. This applies also to the 'cc' line.
- Take care when selecting 'reply to all'. Although the original email might be suitable for all recipients, there are occasions when the reply is not. As an example, the Clerk might issue an agenda and other accompanying documents to parish councillors and others, including the press. A councillor might wish to make a comment on the documents and whilst this would be appropriate for councillor colleagues, it might not be appropriate for the other recipients to see those comments.
- Blind copying (bcc) should be used with discernment; it is deceptive to the primary recipient. As an alternative, the email should be forwarded on to the third party, with a short note explaining any confidentiality, after its distribution. If blind copying is essential; e.g for a confidential document where all recipients must remain anonymous; then senders should address the email to themselves, and everyone else as 'bcc' recipients.
- If you send an email in error, contact the recipient immediately by telephone and ask them to ignore/delete the message. It is polite to reply to emails promptly; a simple acknowledgement with a promise that you will give the email your full attention at a given later point is preferable to 'sitting on' the message.
- Never use email to reply to correspondence or an invitation that was not sent by email or does not supply an email address as an RSVP option.
- The Clerk's communication with parish councillors is often crucial to the effective management of Parish Council business. Responses are not always required, but members should respond if so requested.
- Remember when replying that, unless indicated otherwise, it is usually only necessary to respond to the one person who sent the email. The Reply to All button rarely needs to be used.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The use of social media is an increasingly popular communication tool. The Parish Council has introduced a Facebook page. Set out below is the policy adopted by the Council to help Councillors and Staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as emails, blogs, wikis, social networking websites, podcasts, forums, message boards, or comments on web-articles, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other relevant social media websites.

This includes the use of social media for the purposes of:

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

This policy outlines the standards the council requires councillors and staff to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which the council will monitor the use of social media and the action to be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

THE SCOPE OF THIS PART OF THE POLICY

The council has a corporate presence on the web and by use of email, which 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. Over time the Parish Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur this Social Media Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangement

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 will 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 in person, but posting them on the internet means that they have been published in a way that cannot be contained. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. Members must be aware that their profile as a councillor means the more likely it is they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking.

It must be remembered that communications on the internet are permanent and public. When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the council would be content with the statement should it be made public.

RULES FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA.

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 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 personally, and not in their role as a councillor, 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.

All staff and councillors must ensure they use council 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, ensuring it complies 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 post will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) and also the council for its' records.

The Clerk is responsible for maintaining and update the Parish Council Website. The website may be used to:

- Post notices and minutes of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Post good 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 i. e. Police, Library, district council, etc.
- Announce new information appropriate to the council.
- Post or Share information promoting bodies for community benefit such as schools, Scouts, sports clubs and community groups
- Post other items as the council see fit.
- Facebook and/or Twitter, etc, 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 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 make false or misleading statements.

- Not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. They must protect the good reputation of the council.
- 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, 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 or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
- Do not post comments that you would not be prepared 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 videos from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph 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 raised in any form of social media needs further consideration by the council it may be raised at either the open forum or as a 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 should be reported to the Clerk and referred to the council as required.

The Policy will be reviewed annually.

27th July 2021

END