

WINTERBORNE ST MARTIN PARISH COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

THE POLICY

1. Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Winterborne St Martin Parish Council (the Council) regarding communications. 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 deal with issues that may arise for example when dealing with the media.

2. Parish Council Correspondence

a) The first 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 will reply within five working days of receipt of the contact either with a reply to the matter or as acknowledgement of receipt together with an idea of when the correspondent can expect a full reply.

b) The Clerk should deal with any correspondence as requested by the Council following a meeting.

c) No individual Councillor or Officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Council, a committee, subcommittee or working party. Regular updates must be provided to the Council where an individual has been making enquiries. In particular, Councillors and Officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.

d) All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council where possible.

e) 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 (e.g. copy to XX).

3. Agenda Items for Council, Committees and Working Parties

a) Agendas should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision, and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.

b) Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.

c) Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk where possible, or by the Councillor dealing with a specific matter ensuring that the Clerk is copied to all such communications.

4. Councillor Correspondence to external parties

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

b) A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

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c) Correspondence from the Clerk marked “Confidential” must be treated as such and not be disclosed to anyone.

d) 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.

5. Communications with Parish Council Staff

a) Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, other than the Parish Clerk, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or subcommittee with appropriate delegated powers from the council).

b) 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.

c) Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Council.

d) E-mails:

- i. Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk or Councillors; reasons for urgency should be stated;
- ii. Information to Councillors from external sources should normally be directed via the Clerk and internally should be copied to the Clerk;
- iii. E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk;
- iv. Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

e) Meetings with the Clerk or other officers:

- i. Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
- ii. Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer;
- iii. Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate Council business and not matters driven by a personal or political agenda

6. Contact with the Media

a) The purpose of a press release 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, is responsible for issuing formal press releases on behalf of the Council.

b) Proactive media releases will be issued to promote a decision or work of the Council in accordance with 6a.

c) Reactive press releases will 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 in accordance with 6a.

d) Approaches from the media should be referred to the Chairman who is the authorised contact with the media in consultation with the Parish Clerk. The Parish Clerk is, however, authorised to speak to the media in the Chairman’s absence. The Clerk is also authorised to answer minor questions from the press without consulting the Chairman.

e) Statements made by the Chairman to the media should reflect the Council’s opinion.

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- f) 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.
- g) It should be noted that on occasions, the most effective strategy is not to respond to the media.
- h) Press releases will not be used to comment on national political debates unless of specific relevance to this Council.
- i) Statements should preferably be submitted in writing for the avoidance of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.
- j) Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council.
- k) Individual members will not be permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Council.
- l) Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.
- m) Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. However, such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks.
- n) Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Chairman or the Parish Clerk. If other Members choose to use the letters column to express their own opinions on Council policies, they should make clear that the views put forward are those of the individual Member. Care should be taken not to disclose any information of a confidential nature, if a Member is unclear whether information is confidential they should consult the Parish Clerk.
- o) Members and the Clerk should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

7. Guidance on the use of Social Media

- a) Members should exercise caution in the use of social media which includes but is not limited to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs and various discussion forums, LinkedIn and e-mail.
- b) Councillors can have blurred identities; they may have a social media account which they comment as both an individual and a councillor. It must at all times be made clear whether councillors are posting as individuals or in their capacity as a Councillor. Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply as much to on-line activity as they do to other written or oral communication. On-line content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.
- c) The key to whether on-line activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether the Councillor is giving the impression that they are acting as a Councillor. It is the perception

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that counts. If the perception is that a Councillor is acting as a Councillor, the provisions of the Code of Conduct apply.

d) Councillors should be respectful and informative, never condescending or “loud. “Loud” is when capital letters are used. Use sentence-case format. Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language which could be deemed as offensive, especially in respect of race, sexuality, disability etc. should not be published on any social media site. Avoid personal attack, on-line fights and hostile communications. Never use an individual’s name unless you have written permission. Respect the privacy of other councillors and residents. Be aware not to publish anything which violates laws or regulations

e) In the main, Councillors have the same legal duties on-line as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. It is useful to remember that extra care needs to be taken for electoral campaigning and when writing on planning matters.

f) When using social media it is important to remember the Nolan Principles –

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership