Water Orton Parish Council

Communications Policy

1. Introduction and Scope

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and provide guidelines.

Water Orton Parish Council (WOPC) 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 overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what WOPC does, whilst also enabling WOPC 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. A separate policy on Social Media & Electronic Communication exists and should be considered in conjunction with this policy.

The principles of these guidelines apply to Parish Councillors, the Clerk to WOPC and all 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 WOPC 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, the district and region.
- be an effective voice of the community
- maintain and enhance the reputation of WOPC
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of WOPC or the parish

3. Who is Communicating?

3.1 Proper Officer

The Proper Officer (the Clerk) holds responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies. The primary point of contact for the parish council is the Clerk.

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 where appropriate should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letterheaded paper, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the parish 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 must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the parish council and must not be used to convey personal views. Council letterheaded paper is used by the Clerk in the day to day running of the Parish Council and its interests.

3.2 Councillors

Elected members maybe 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 WOPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email, and other methods.

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

Councillors should not 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 WOPC. 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 WOPC, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject. WOPC will agree its statements for release to the press and social media.

All councillors are provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

Council letterheaded paper 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 parish council and must not be used to convey personal views.

Emails received by the Council's Proper Officer, or Members 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 Council Meetings and Councillor Interaction

WOPC meets on the last Thursday of every month (except August and December). Meetings start at 7:00pm.

Time will be allocated for public participation at the start of a meeting.

Councillors must ensure that they have read and understand any documents for discussion and come to meetings able to make an informed decision or identify information that is required in order for them to do so.

The use of mobile phones and other internet connected devices should not impact negatively on the running, effectiveness or perception of council meetings.

WOPC has several committees/working groups whose activities are reported back to the council in the monthly meetings.

An initial draft of the minutes shall be produced by the Clerk and issued to all Councillors by email for review. Any amendments shall be made and a subsequent draft issued for publication. The Agenda and Minutes of the meetings are published on the council website following approval at a council meeting.

Councillors who have taken on responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties should provide a copy of any such communications with the Clerk.

Guidance on interaction:

- WOPC Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the parish council,
- All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman or the Parish Clerk.
- If appropriate, for a specific issue the Chairman may authorise another councillor to make a statement on behalf of WOPC.
- All media comment must accurately reflect WOPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of WOPC 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 carefully consider the impact of 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of WOPC 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 WOPC'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 WOPC:
    - that other councillors may hold a different view;
    - that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by WOPC.

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

Consider the impact of copying in others to communications.

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, Members, Officer, or business suppliers.

Use a Parish Council signature so that it is clear in what capacity you are writing.

Copy in (either cc or bcc) any appropriate officer or councillor.

5. Responsibilities and Accountabilities

Officers and Councillors alike are responsible for ensuring compliance with this and related policies.

6. Procedure

6.2 Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Groups

- 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.
- Communications between councillors regarding agenda items should have regard to the potential issue of pre-determination. While it is perfectly acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and information, councillors should ensure they retain an open mind and avoid comments that might give the perception of having reached a conclusion.
- Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for “information only”, this information will be circulated via the Clerk.
- Correspondence from the Clerk marked “Confidential” must be treated as such and not be disclosed to anyone.

6.3 Correspondence with external parties

- All correspondence for the Parish Council should be actioned by the Clerk. Councillors should forward any correspondence received to the Clerk.
- Parish Councillors’ should be cautious in communicating with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries should be through 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, should 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.

E-mails: Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated; 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.

Meetings with the Clerk or other officers: Wherever possible an appointment should be made; meetings should be relevant to the work of the officer; councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not driven by a personal agenda.

8. Contact with the Media
The Clerk is the first point of contact for the media. Approaches from the media should be referred to Parish Clerk. Individual councillors are not permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council.

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.

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, parish 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. Other Methods of Communication

9.1 Online Presence

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

WOPC's website is to be regularly updated and kept up-to-date.

All communications should promote the council website and if appropriate its social media accounts.

It is important to ensure that links to the website are provided from other key partners, especially North Warwickshire Borough Council and Warwickshire County Council

9.2 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.

Locked 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.

9.3 Publications

The Coleshill Post and The Bridge which are monthly publications. are used by the Parish Council to publicise parish council issues and highlight other organisations, information and activities within Water Orton.

9.4 Parish Council Logo

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

10. Related Policies and Procedures

These include but are not limited to:
Code of Conduct
Dignity at Work Policy

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