

## **Draft Westham Parish Council Social Media and Communication Policy**

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables Westham Parish Council to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves. The Parish Council want to communicate with each other in as many ways as viable so residents can discover what the council do, how it is done, how residents can influence decisions, how local communities can help and become involved etc.

The Council has a website, Facebook page and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the 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 Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

The Council Facebook page intends to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and promote our community positively.

### **Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:**

#### **General guidance**

Councillors and officers must insure they do not disclose information of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press or other media on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on council or committee agendas or at any other private briefing. Councillors should not use the prefix 'Councillor' when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating council policy, which is not necessarily consistent with your personal opinion. Any councillor failing to follow the guidelines set out in this policy may find themselves in breach of the Members' Code of Conduct and subject to a complaint and could face disciplinary action.

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
- Not contain any personal information.
- If it is official Council business it will be moderated by the Clerk to the Council;
- Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, we ask you to follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official Council posts, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

The site is not monitored 24/7 and we will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. Please do not include personal/private information in your social media posts to us.

Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official

purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the council's Clerk by emailing.

We retain the right to remove comments or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements.
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page. The Council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

#### **Parish Council Website.**

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload. The Council may, at its discretion, allow and enable approved local groups to have and maintain a presence on its website for the purpose of presenting information about the group's activities. The local group would be responsible for maintaining the content and ensuring that it meets the Council's 'rules and expectation' for the web site. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the web site if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's 'rules and expectation' for its website. Where content on the website is maintained by a local group it should be clearly marked that such content is not the direct responsibility of the Council.

#### **Parish Council email**

WPC and its councillors will be provided with a secure e-mail address and all parish related communications between councillors and council/parishioners will use the official WPC e-mail. The Clerk to the council has their own council email address; clerk@westhamparishcouncil.org.uk. This email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message should be used when appropriate. The Clerk is responsible for dealing with general messages and queries about the running of the council, emails received will be passed on to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk. All new emails requiring data to be passed on, will be followed up with a Data consent form for completion before action is taken with that correspondence. Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. NB any emails copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act. These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept. Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

#### **SMS (texting)**

Members and the Clerk may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

**Video Conferencing e.g. Skype**

If this medium is used to communicate please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

**Internal communication and access to information within the Council**

The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

**Published communications**

WPC will use the Parish Pump publication and local newspapers, e.g. Herald, Gazette, to write articles, distribute leaflets etc to inform the parishioners. WPC will also begin to develop an explanation leaflet to distribute to all residents to say what the role of the council is, what it does, how to get involved etc.

WPC have various notice boards around the parish, these will be used to inform residents about the current councillors and how to contact them using WPC e-mail address, postal address, telephone number and office opening hours.

**Face-to-face communications**

WPC will work towards holding weekly surgeries in the local areas so the councillors and/or clerk are more easily accessible to parishioners. Possible venues will be sourced.

WPC want to become involved in local events to also make it easier for residents to ask questions, volunteer and generally become more involved in the running of the parish.

**Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council**

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council’s Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation). Members should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the ‘Reply to All’ option if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

**Appendix 1**

WPC know that it will take time to develop all possible communications, therefore these are the priorities over the years 2019 – 2021. These tasks/priorities will be delegated so all are involved.

Year One Priorities	Year 2
Professional website WPC e-mail address for the council and councillors FaceBook – one account only – agree who, what protocols for publication and updating Update WPC notice boards Source venues, dates for surgeries in local areas Become involved in local events. Publish council information, articles etc in the Parish Pump, Herald, Gazette	Social Media communications investigated and developed from either – Twitter, Instagram, or another. WPC Leaflet Schedule of weekly/fortnightly surgeries published and ‘manned’.