

Weedon Parish Council Communications Policy

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WEEDON PARISH COUNCIL

Communications Policy

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Weedon Parish Council ("**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.
- 1.2 The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what the Council does, whilst also enabling the Council to make informed decisions using information received from residents, the local authority, suppliers and contractors.
- 1.3 The principles of these guidelines apply to Parish Councillors ("**Councillors**") and the Parish Clerk ("**Clerk**"). It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Council.

2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable the Council 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;
- be an effective voice of the community;
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with different groups; and
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the image or integrity of the Council or the parish.

3. Who is Communicating?

Parish Clerk

- 3.1 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.
- 3.2 The Clerk is provided with a Council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business (parishclerk@weedonbucks.org.uk).
- 3.2 Official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letterheaded paper or using the Council email address, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Council.
- 3.3 Where correspondence from the Clerk is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

- 3.4 Council letterheaded paper 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 is used by the Clerk and any authorised staff in the day to day running of the Council and its interests.

Parish Councillors

- 3.5 Elected members may be 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 the Council. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.
- 3.6 When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Clerk will 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 the Council.
- 3.7 Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in one of the following ways:
- refer the matter to the Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate;
 - request an item on a relevant agenda; or
 - investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Clerk.
- 3.8 A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or one's role within it should be sent to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Parish Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised. No individual Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Council, a committee, sub-committee or working party.
- 3.9 Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on Council related matters reflects and does not in any way contradict the decisions and policies of the Council, regardless of the Councillor's individual views on any subject. Councillors must not commit the Council to any action which has not previously been decided at a Council meeting. The Council as a whole will agree any statements for release to the press and social media.
- 3.10 Councillors assigned responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with other agencies shall keep the Clerk updated and report back to the next relevant meeting.
- 3.11 Council letterheaded paper may be used if requested, when preparing communications from any Councillor to other agencies but must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the Council at a meeting and must not be used to convey personal views. All written communications to third parties should be approved by the Clerk before being sent.
- 3.12 In cases where a response to communication needs to be sent urgently and cannot wait until a meeting, Councillors should liaise with the Clerk to agree an appropriate response. This must not commit the Council to any action that has not already been resolved at a meeting and must not imply liability or contradict the decisions and policies of the Council.

4. Good Practice

- 4.1 All individuals communicating on behalf of the Council must be aware that every piece of communication reflects on the reputation of the Council in the community. All communication should be courteous and professional.
- 4.2 Councillors and any staff must ensure that any electronic device which they use to access an email address used for the Council business is secured (or that the email account is secured) using a password or PIN and that this is not shared with any other person. All such devices must have suitable anti-viral software running.
- 4.3 Emails received by the Clerk 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 UK General Data Protection Regulation or in the course of legal proceedings.

5. The Media

- 5.1 It is important that the press have access to the Clerk and Councillors and to background information to assist them in giving accurate information to the public. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public is properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary. All media enquiries should be directed to the Clerk, and in the Clerk's absence the Chair of Councillors ("**Chair**").
- 5.2 All media comment must accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies. Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation shall take place to establish who was responsible, and appropriate action must be taken.
- 5.3 When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from legal experts before any response is made.
- 5.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include: the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Councillor contact details are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences which are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.
- 5.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or Chair are authorised to make contact with the media. All responses to the press should be drafted by the Chair with the assistance of the Clerk for accuracy regarding the Council's current policy on the matter in question and to its lawfulness.
- 5.6 Responses drafted on any matter may however be directed to another Councillor with the assistance of the Clerk and to other professional advisers for accuracy and lawfulness. In this instance the Chair should be made fully aware of the response and agree to its contents.
- 5.7 The Clerk or any Councillor may draft a press release to explain the Council's position on any particular matter of interest, however it must be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure the principles

outlined in this policy are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

- 5.8 All decisions of the Council made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media.
- 5.9 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 the Council;
 - that other Councillors may hold a different view; and
 - that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by the Council.
- They must always maintain that they speak as individuals and not on behalf of the Council, in line with the Council's Standing Orders and adherence to its Code of Conduct.
- 5.10 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.
- 5.11 The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 provide that a person may not orally report or comment about a meeting as it is taking place if that person is present at the meeting of a Council or its committees. However, that person otherwise may:
- film, photograph or make an audio recording of a meeting;
 - use any other means for enabling persons not present to see or hear proceedings at a meeting as it takes place or later; and
 - report or comment on the proceedings in writing during or after a meeting or orally report or comment after the meeting.
- 5.12 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the Government's [Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#).

6. Online Presence

- 6.1 The Clerk or Chair will ensure that the Weedon village website managed by Council: Weedonbucks.org.uk is regularly updated and that all statutory Council information is displayed. All online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. Any inaccurate information or otherwise concerning online content which relates in any way to the Council should be reported to the Clerk.
- 6.2 The Clerk may use social media in order to post news and events relating to the work of the Council or the community. This may include links to the Council website.
- 6.3 When using social media (including email) Councillors and any staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and Council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative. Councillors and any staff must not:

- hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms;
- present personal opinions as that of the Council;
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council;
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Council;
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks;
- engage in personal attacks, online fights or hostile communications;
- publish personal data of individuals without permission;
- publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission;
- post any information that infringes the copyright of others;
- post any information that may be deemed libel;
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment;
- bring the Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity;
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief; or
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence.

6.4 Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Councillors, staff or residents should report them to the Clerk (or the Chair if it relates to the Clerk).
