

Watlington Parish Council

Communications Policy 2016/2017

Aims

To establish clear, easy to use channels of communication between Watlington Parish Council (herein referred to as 'the Council') and residents, and vice versa. To provide information on important matters in an appropriate manner so as to facilitate and encourage informed comment from interested individuals and groups.

Introduction

Each Parish Councillor has a duty to represent, without bias, the interest of the whole community. They will endeavour to do their best and are available to help residents with regard to matters relating to the parish of Watlington. They may be contacted by telephone and a contact list is displayed on the Council noticeboards.

If a resident would like a Councillor to visit, they should direct their request to the Clerk who will see if a visit is possible. If the matter is important, then a letter or email to the Clerk will ensure that this will be brought before the Council and dealt with in an appropriate manner.

The rules that the Council must follow are set out in Standing Orders. Items from Standing Orders related to communications have been included in this document for simplicity but may have been superseded if Standing Orders have been revised since this version of the policy was issued.

All communications from the Council will:

- be polite, respectful, timely and relevant;
- not contain content that is unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, discriminatory or offensive;
- not contain content copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
- not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details subject to prior approval by the person or organisation concerned;
- be moderated by either the Chair or the Clerk unless the communication forms part of an agreed campaign; and
- not be used for the dissemination of any commercial or political advertising.

Equally, we expect any communications to the Council will:

- be polite, respectful and relevant;
- not contain content that is unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, discriminatory or offensive;
- not contain content copied from elsewhere, for which the enquirer does not own the copyright;
- not send large volumes of the same message (also called "spamming"); and
- not contain anyone's personal information, other than necessary basic contact details.

Parish Council Meetings

The Council will meet at 8.00pm on the second Tuesday of each month except August. The Council will meet in the Parish Office, unless otherwise notified. The agenda for the next meeting is posted on the Council noticeboard and website a minimum of three working days before the meeting.

Members of the public may raise a matter of concern or comment on an item on the agenda at any meeting. Those who wish to speak at a meeting must inform the Chair for that meeting before the start of the meeting. If they wish to raise subjects not on the agenda they must give at least 24 hours notice to the Clerk. Once the meeting has commenced however, members of the public are not permitted to contribute to the discussion unless the Chair feels that they have some expertise or experience in the matter being discussed. In this case, the Chair will temporarily adjourn the meeting to allow them to speak.

Annual Parish Meetings

This meeting is held in May of every year. This is not a Council meeting but is a statutory requirement. Its purpose is to provide residents with the opportunity to discuss in public subjects of relevance to the community. Any issue can be raised for discussion to enable residents to air their views and debate local issues of concern to them. The meeting will usually provide a summary of the activities of the Council and other voluntary organisations during the past year.

Outreach Meetings

An outreach meeting is held annually, usually in November, in Christmas Common. Its purpose is to provide residents that do not live in the town itself with an opportunity to discuss and debate local issues of concern to them.

From time to time the Council may decide to undertake additional outreach work, such as roadshows or pop-up information stands at locations within the town or the surrounding parish area. At least two Councillors must be in attendance at all times during these outreach events and must ensure that they reflect any agreed resolutions or policies of the Council when speaking to residents.

Press Relations

For official communications on behalf of WPC, normally only the Clerk and Chair are given the authority to issue press releases and comments to the local media. All Councillors must refer any press enquiries to the Chair or Clerk, unless express permission has been given by the Chair of Full Council or a sub-committee, for the Councillor to speak to the press on a specific issue. Where Councillors provide such statements (verbal or written) the Clerk must be informed of their content as soon as possible.

Councillors may make comments to the press in a personal capacity.

Noticeboards

The Council maintains five noticeboards in the town:

1. outside the Parish Office:
2. outside the library:
3. in Hill Road car park
4. at the Recreation Ground; and
5. on the Town Hall gate.

The following items will be displayed permanently on noticeboards 1 – 4:

- Councillors names, addresses and contact telephone numbers
- Council meeting dates for the year
- A list of Council communications channels

Noticeboard 5 is too small for anything other than a single A4 page and is therefore used for items of current importance

Notice of the annual audited accounts will be displayed when appropriate. The meeting notice will be displayed at least three working days in advance of the meeting for full Council meetings or three calendar days for Committee meetings. These notice periods do not include the day of the meeting or the day of posting of the notice, in accordance with the Council Standing Orders. Notices for residents will be displayed as and when appropriate.

Parish Newsletter

The Clerk will prepare the monthly parish newsletter for approval by Councillor's via email. The newsletter will be submitted to the Watlington Times for publication and a standalone printed copy will be made available at the GP's surgery. The newsletter will also be made available electronically on the Council's website.

Parish Website

The Council's website is available at <http://www.watlington-oxon-pc.gov.uk>.

The following items will be permanently available on the website:

- Councillors' names and brief profiles
- Council meeting dates for the year
- The approved Council minutes
- The Council's Annual Report

The Clerk will ensure that all Council information included on the website is regularly updated.

Social Media

The Council Facebook page is available at <https://www.facebook.com/pg/Watlington-Parish-Council-316222838527156/about/>. The purpose of the Facebook page is to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within the Parish and to promote constructive thoughts and comments from residents within the parish.

In order to ensure that all discussions on the Facebook page are productive, respectful, energised 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 Councillors or staff, will not be permitted;
- Share freely and be generous, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due;

- Be wary of getting drawn into long running threads;
- Stay on topic; and
- Refrain from using the Facebook page for commercial purposes or to market products.

The site is not monitored continuously 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.

Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes. However, we will endeavour to respond to specific questions in a timely manner. Please do not include personal/private information in your Facebook posts/messages to us.

We retain the right to remove comments or content that break the provisions of this policy. Non-compliance with this policy will not be tolerated and can result in a ban.

The Council is not responsible for the accuracy of content posted by any subscriber in any forum; opinions expressed in comments on the Council's social media forums do not necessarily represent those of the Council.

All comments, once posted, become the property of the Council and we reserve the right to reproduce, distribute, publish, display or edit. Derivative work can also be created from such postings or content, and used for any purpose, in any form and on any other media.

The Council are not responsible, liable for and do not endorse the privacy practices of Facebook or any linked websites. Your use of Facebook and any linked websites is at your own risk.

The Council assumes no responsibility or liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred as a result of any use or reliance upon the information and material contained within or downloaded from these websites.

Facebook may occasionally be unavailable and the Council accept no responsibility for this lack of service.

The presence of any advertisement on Facebook is not an endorsement of the authenticity or quality of the goods, services or website and the Council will not be held responsible for any claims arising in that respect.

The Council will not engage in/with, and we discourage posts or comments on, issues of a political nature. Comments must not advertise commercial products or services.

By choosing to comment and/or use any Council social media site, users are deemed to agree to this policy.

The Clerk and Chair have access to update WPC's facebook page. Councillors or staff who use social media either in their personal or professional life may engage in online discussion on local issues, but they must make it clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the parish council. Councillors should be mindful of comments they made on social media, particularly with regards to their obligations on predetermination¹.

The Council does not currently operate any other forms of social media. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it

¹ Councillors should not have a closed mind when they make a decision, as decisions taken by those with pre-determined views are vulnerable to successful legal challenge. Please see NALC Guidance on predetermination for further information.

delivers. When these changes occur this communications policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

Most online communities have their own rules and guidelines, which we will always abide by.

Correspondence

All correspondence relating to the parish should be addressed to the Clerk in the first instance. This will ensure that the matter is recorded and passed to the relevant person or organisation as soon as practicably possible.

If a resident wishes a matter to be formally discussed at a Council meeting, then the Clerk must be notified at least six clear working days prior to the meeting to enable the item to be placed on the Agenda.

Our email account is monitored mainly during office hours (09:30 – 12:30), Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can and within 5 working days.

The Council will maintain one email address, currently it is wpc@watlington-oxon-pc.gov.uk. The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing it on to the relevant Councillor or external agency to deal with.

The recognised procedure for the sending of emails from the Council to local residents, businesses and organisations is that they will be sent by the Clerk. Where Councillors need to communicate with local residents, businesses and organisations they should, preferably, keep to the recognised procedure by sending their email to the Clerk. Where, for reasons of expediency, this is not practical the email concerned must be copied to the Clerk. This procedure was adopted to ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

Responding to Consultations

Consultations received by the Council are brought to Strategy Committee. If a response is required before the next Committee is due to be held, the consultation may be brought to Full Council. A Councillor will be nominated at Committee, or Full Council, to draft a response in a timely manner. This draft response will be circulated to the Committee, or Full Council, via email for agreement. One agreed the Clerk will submit the response on behalf of the Council.

Review

This policy shall be reviewed annually.

*Version 1.0
February 2017*

Agreed by Full Council at their meeting on 14th February 2017

Signed and Dated by the Chairman

Ian Hill