

Wokingham Without Parish Council



Press and Media Policy

(Incorporating Social Media)

Version 1.3

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.
- 1.2 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 when dealing with the media.

2. Key aims

- 2.1 The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. All mediums for communication are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.
- 2.2 It is important that the press has access to the Parish 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 unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.
- 2.3 The Council will use its website and presence on social media platforms to positively promote the parish council and its work, promote the assets of the parish council, including the Pinewood Site and its amenities and St Sebastian's Memorial Hall and share information considered by the Clerk to be in the interests of local residents and service users.

3. The Legal Framework

- 3.1 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 governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
- 3.2 The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

4. Contact with the media

- 4.1 The Parish Clerk and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- 4.2 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and appropriate action taken.

- 4.3 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 the Council's solicitor (Blandy and Blandy LLP) before any response is made.
- 4.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Parish 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 Member contact details are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Parish Clerk before any response is made to the media.
- 4.5 All formal requests for comments regarding Wokingham Without Parish Council policy on any matter should be directed to the Parish Clerk in the first instance. If unavailable, the Chairman should be contacted.
- 4.6 When responding to approaches from the media, the Parish Clerk or Chairman are authorised to make contact with the media. All responses to the press should be drafted by the Chairman with the assistance of the Parish Clerk for accuracy regarding Wokingham Without Parish Council current policy on the matter being responded to and its lawfulness.
- 4.7 Responses drafted on any matter may however be directed to another councillor with the assistance of the Parish Clerk and others under Standing Order item 22 for accuracy and lawfulness. In this instance the Chairman should be made fully aware of the response and agree to its contents.
- 4.8 Statements made by the Chairman and the Parish Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion. If Wokingham Without Parish Council does not have an official position on the matter raised, this should be stated as Wokingham Without Parish Council's current position.
- 4.9 Other councillors can communicate with the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council. Councillors are at liberty to communicate with the press in their own right as representatives of the parish. However, they must always maintain that they speak as individuals and not on behalf of Wokingham Without Parish Council, in adherence to the Code of Conduct.
- 4.10 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.

5. Attendance of media at council meetings

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.
- 5.2 The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings where seating and workspace will be made available.
- 5.3 On 6 August 2014, the 1960 Act was amended by the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 ("the 2014 Regulations"). The amended 1960 Act provides that a person may not orally report or comment about a meeting as it takes place if he is present at the meeting of a Parish Council or its committees but otherwise may:
 - a) Film, photograph or make an audio recording of a meeting;
 - b) Use any other means for enabling persons not present to see or hear proceedings at a meeting as it takes place or later;

- c) Report or comment on the proceedings in writing during or after a meeting or orally report or comment after the meeting.

6. Press releases

- 6.1 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. It is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk and Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 6.2 The Parish Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Parish Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section 3 (The legal framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

7. Social Media

- 7.1 ‘Social media’ is the collection of tools and online spaces (such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc.) allowing users to interact with each other in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This interaction can be through computers, mobile phones and/or new generation tablet technology such as iPads.
- 7.2 Social media is transforming the way ordinary people and organisations, including local government, communicate and learn from one another. Wokingham Without Parish Council needs to use social media to foster relationships and understanding with the public, our service users and stakeholders.
- 7.3 The business risks associated with social media are generally no different than those you face in your day-to-day role as an employee of the Council or Member in more traditional media interactions. However, the speed and scale at which a message can be amplified on social media presents a new challenge for Councils to manage proactively.

8. Approved council social media usage

- 8.1 All the council’s communications via social media will be proactively managed by the Parish Clerk. The Parish Clerk is responsible for the management of these accounts ensuring the protection of access passwords and codes and for regularly reviewing the privacy settings for each account.
- 8.2 All official sites and accounts are managed by the Parish Clerk. Creating special corporate accounts, posting or interacting on behalf of the Council should not be done without first approval from the Parish Clerk.

9. Official council social media accounts

Activity	Website	Facebook Page	Twitter
Parish Council	www.wokinghamwithout-pc.gov.uk	Wokingham Without Parish Council	@W_W_P_C

10. Guidance for the use of council social media

10.1 **Be transparent and truthful**

When using social media, avoid unsupported opinions or conclusions based on guess work. Don't make false, misleading, unfair or unsubstantiated claims about the Council, our employees, our Councillors, service users, stakeholders or partner organisations. If you discover that you have posted something that is factually incorrect, you should amend it and make it clear that you have done so.

10.2 **Show respect**

Posts must not contain anything contrary to the Council's policies about equality and diversity. Anything containing racist, sexist, homophobic, sexually explicit, threatening, abusive, disrespectful or unlawful comments must not be published. In particular, you should not:

- Post inappropriate comments about colleagues, councillors or service users.
- Bully or intimidate colleagues, councillors or anyone else. You are expected to treat your peers with respect both in the physical workplace and online.
- Pursue personal relationships with colleagues, councillors or service users.
- Discuss or raise workplace concerns.
- Post sexually explicit material or material that is unlawfully discriminatory.
- Engage in unlawful activity.

10.3 **Don't return fire**

Always be polite, thoughtful and respectful. Do not engage in online disputes or get defensive. If you feel a particular comment warrants a response from the Council, please bring it to the attention of the Parish Clerk.

10.4 **Be a good ambassador**

Remember that you are an ambassador for the Council and be cordial at all times. Respect the law (copyright laws in particular) and when you reference other information, always link back to the source where possible.

10.5 **Use common sense**

Anything posted online can be copied and redistributed beyond your control and may have unforeseen consequences. Keep in mind that content you post will become part of the public domain and information intended for a select few could be passed on. Assume that what you write could be front page news and remember that once something is on the web, it is almost impossible to remove.

10.6 **Confidentiality**

You must always respect Council confidentiality and information highlighted as confidential should never be disclosed. You should only share information about the Council that is already in the public domain. You should never add derogatory comments on these issues.

10.7 **Accountability**

You are personally responsible for your posts, comments and behaviour online. If you are found to be posting content that breaches these guidelines, you will be required to remove them and it could result in disciplinary action.

10.8 **Staff abuse**

If you are being bullied or harassed by a colleague, councillor or associate of the Council, you must report it appropriately. Most social networks have a facility for reporting abusive activity. If you have concerns, please raise them with the Parish Clerk. In most circumstances, where there is unlawful activity, it may be appropriate to report this to the police.