

WINDLESHAM PARISH COUNCIL MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

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Introduction

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, as issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The code is statutory guidance and therefore councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

Failure to follow the council's Media and Communications Policy could lead to a breach of the statutory code and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the council's reputation. It is important that all Councillor and officers understand the implications of this code which this policy explains within a local context.

This policy should be read in conjunction with the Members' Code of Conduct. It should also be noted that any Freedom of Information requests will be dealt with under the Council's FOI policy.

Approach to publicity

The Council welcomes enquiries from the press and media, and recognises that a good relationship with the press helps communicate effectively with residents.

Equally, the Council recognises that taking a proactive approach to communication ensures information is made available to residents in a timely manner and is accessible via as many media sources as possible including emerging social media platforms.

Principles of communication

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity identifies key principles regarding publicity, and the Council will ensure any publicity:

- Is lawful
- Is cost effective
- Is objective
- Is even-handed
- Is appropriate
- Has regard to equality and diversity
- Is issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

Official Council press releases

- The Council recognises that the use of press releases is a key technique for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.

An official Council press release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole. In certain circumstances, it may be appropriate for a Councillor (normally the Chairman, Deputy Chairman or committee Chairman) to draft the press release, but the Clerk (or other nominated officer) will be responsible for checking and subsequently issuing any official Council press release.

All press releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Councillor. Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a Councillor's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

- Press releases will be issued to local newspapers and copies will be made available on the council's website. An edited version may be available via the council's social media platforms, with a link to the full story available.

Requests for interview

Any request for an interview with a Councillor or officer should be referred to the Clerk (or other nominated officer) in the first instance. The Clerk, in liaison with the Chairman, will determine the most appropriate Councillor or officer to be put forward for interview.

Where a Councillor is authorised to speak on behalf of the council, it is their responsibility to ensure they are clear on the corporate position of the council, and that their responses to questions accurately reflect this.

- Where an officer is authorised to speak on behalf of the council, they must never give their opinion on specific Council policy and must remember their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge in support of the council's agreed policies.

If a Councillor has not been specifically authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, a Councillor who is asked for a comment should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as such.

Publicity during elections

- There are specific rules governing publicity when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (pre-election period), all proactive publicity about candidates is halted.

During the purdah period, all Council publicity shall be managed by the Clerk (or other nominated officer), and any quotes provided in support of press releases will be given by authorised officers.

Social media

- The Council recognises that for some residents, accessing information via social media platforms is their preferred method. While there are too many social media sites to include all of them, the Council will endeavour to use those which are most widely used, and regularly review the type and number of social media sites used.
- Social media sites will be used to support other communications issued by the Council and will help provide a consistent message across all media formats. To help achieve this, all social media releases will be approved by the Clerk (or other nominated officer).
- Where officers use social media in a professional capacity to represent the council, the council's corporate identity will be used and not that of any individual officer.
- Officers using social media in this way must respect copyright, data protection, freedom of information and other laws, and be aware of the risks of action for defamation. Officers must not use insulting or offensive language or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in the workplace or elsewhere.

Social Media Communications Policy and House Rules for Social Media Engagement

The following wording will be published on the website and official social media platforms. This is to ensure that all use of social media remains fair, respectful, and safe.

- Social Media Communications Policy

The Council welcomes public engagement across a range of platforms; however, posts or messages from members of the public via social media platforms (such as Facebook and Instagram) shall not be regarded as official correspondence.

The Council is not obliged to respond to any such messages. Residents wishing to contact the Parish Council formally must do so by:

- Emailing the Parish Clerk at clerk@windleshampc.gov.uk
- Submitting a written letter to:
The Council Office, The Avenue, Lightwater, GU18 5RG
- Using the online contact form on the Council's official website: www.windleshampc.gov.uk

House Rules for Social Media Engagement

All users (including Councillors) engaging with the Council via social media must comply with both the respective platform's Terms of Use and the following conditions:

- You are wholly responsible for any content you post, including shared material.
- Posts considered inappropriate by the Council may be removed in part or in full.
- The Council will report and remove any social media accounts misusing Windlesham Parish Council branding or imagery without permission.

The Council reserves the right to hide or remove posts, comments, or private messages that contain:

- Graphic, sensitive, or offensive imagery
- Abusive or obscene content
- Discriminatory language or conduct
- Misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation
- Off-topic or irrelevant comments
- Public mentions of Council staff by name
- Derogatory or accusatory remarks about individual Officers or Councillors
- Private or personal information about staff or Councillors irrelevant to their role
- Intellectual property infringement
- Content in breach of legal or regulatory obligations
- Spam, trolling, or persistent disruptive behaviour

Before any content is removed, the Council may take screenshots of the material and retain it in line with the Council's privacy policy to justify the moderation action.

Repeat violations may lead to the user being blocked or reported to the platform provider. A private warning message will typically be issued before such action is taken, explaining the breach and potential next steps.

The Council also reserves the right to challenge or correct inaccurate or misleading public information, including escalating complaints to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) where necessary.

Users who witness a post they believe violates these rules are encouraged to report it directly through the platform's moderation tools.

General guidance for Councillors and officers

- Councillors and officers must ensure they do not disclose information that is 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 and officers should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the council.
- When communicating with the press or on social media, councillors should take care to make clear when they are expressing a personal view and not speaking on behalf of the Council. If using the title "Councillor", this distinction should be explicit to avoid any implication that council policy is being stated.

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 to the Monitoring Officer.

- Any officer failing to follow the guidance set out in this policy could face disciplinary action.