

Whimble Parish Council

Communications and Media Policy

(Approved by the Council on 17 March 2025)

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Whimble Parish Council ('the Council') receives enquiries and communication from local residents, other organisations and members of the public both in electronic and non-electronic formats.
- 1.2 Whilst enquiries from the media are rare, this Policy also covers how the Council will deal with these.
- 1.3 Communication includes the following forms:
 - At face-to-face meetings
 - At online or telephone meetings
 - In written communication
 - In verbal communication
 - In non-verbal communication
 - In electronic and social media communication, posts, statements and comments.
- 1.4 The purpose of this Communications and Media Policy is to create a structured approach for the Council, Councillors and Officers for the following purposes:
 - Establish and maintain effective communications internally and externally
 - Raise the public profile of the Council
 - Establish and maintain positive reputation of Whimble and the Council
 - Respond proactively to both opportunities and challenges in the public arena
 - Provide efficient and timely response to external enquiries including from the local community and media
 - To clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Parish Clerk and all Councillors
 - To provide guidance on how to handle public and media interest
- 1.5 The aim of the Policy is to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases the Council's communications should be:
 - Open and honest
 - Proactive
 - Responsive and timely
- 1.6 This Policy applies to all Whimble Parish Council officers and councillors.

2.0 Legislation

- 2.1 The Council must comply with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1986 regarding publicity. Any media relations work will comply with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The Code is statutory guidance and the Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions when making any decision on publicity.

3.0 Libel and Defamation

- 3.1 Defamation is the act of making a statement about a person or company that is considered to harm reputation, for example, by lowering others' estimation of the person or company, or by causing them to lose their rank or professional standing. If the defamatory statement is written down (in print or online) it is known as libel. If it is spoken, it is known as slander. There are exceptions to this - posting a defamatory statement online or recording it on a podcast would both be examples of libel.
- 3.2 An organisation may be held responsible for something an employee has written or said if it is on behalf of the company or on a company-sanctioned space. Action can also be taken against anyone repeating libellous information from another source, so careful checks are needed before quoting statements from websites. This can also apply to linking to defamatory information. You should consider whether a statement can be proved before writing or using it – in law, the onus is on the person making the statement to establish its truth.

4.0 Publicity

- 4.1 The Council will use the following channels to publicise what it does and how it spends local taxpayers money:
- The Whimple Parish Council website
 - The Whimple Parish Council Facebook page
 - Whimple What's On Facebook page
 - Whimple News publication
 - Whimple Parish Council meetings
 - The Annual Parish meeting
- 4.2 The objectives of publicity are:
- To ensure that the Council is recognised as one that is open, accountable, accessible and which listens
 - Share and celebrate the Council's successes
 - Give information about policies and services and about the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council's work
 - Share important information that has been sent to the Council from a third party
 - Handle negative issues clearly and decisively

- 4.3 It is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk and councillors to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk to make the decision as to whether or not the information should be published, and in what format.
- 4.4 The Council will have an article in each edition of Whimble News, which aims to promote policies, services, activities and important information from third parties. The content will be drafted by the Parish Clerk in consultation with councillors.

5.0 Publicity during elections

- 5.1 The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself all proactive publicity from the Council about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national, or other elections (including by-elections).
- 5.2 During this period, the Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual members or groups of members. This is to make sure that no individual or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

6.0 Young People and Publicity

- 6.1 Guidelines must be followed if commissioning photographs of children (i.e. under 18 years of age) or if planning photography of children at events and using visual media for publicity purposes.

7.0 Media Queries

- 7.1 The Parish Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries that come into the Council.
- 7.2 In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for a councillor(s) to respond to a media enquiry, but this must be done in consultation with the Parish Clerk.
- 7.3 The Council (i.e. the Parish Clerk and councillors) should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual officers and councillors. The phrase “no comment” should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

8.0 News or press releases

- 8.1 News / press releases are one of the key techniques for publicising council activities, decisions, and achievements.

- 8.2 There are two types of press releases – Official Council Press Releases and Councillor Press Releases.

Official Council Press Releases:

- 8.3 An official council release is made on behalf of the Council and will be written by the Parish Clerk. It is non-party political and may include a quote from the relevant councillor(s).
- 8.4 Official council press releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts, and include an approved quotation from the appropriate councillor. Matters of style, presentation, punctuation, grammar etc are the responsibility of the Parish Clerk.
- 8.5 Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual councillors, identify a political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.
- 8.6 All official council news/press releases will be placed on the Council website within three working days of issue.
- 8.7 It should be borne in mind that a news or press release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and alternative ways of advertising it should be considered e.g. posters, mailings, websites, social networking etc.

Councillor Press Releases:

- 8.8 Councillors can issue personal press releases, and these should be signed in a personal capacity without the word councillor attached to the name. Such press releases are personal and are written and issued by the councillor responsible.
- 8.9 This release may or may not be political and should not include the name of any officer, use the council logo or the council telephone number as a point of contact. It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases, especially those of a factual nature, to be provided to the Parish Clerk. Councillors seeking advice can contact the Parish Clerk.
- 8.10 Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the right to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful when expressing individual views to the media (or on social media). Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made, while it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make it clear that they disagree with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the media (or social media).

9.0 Interviews

- 9.1 If the Council or councillor(s) is contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to the Parish Clerk. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist.
- 9.2 Officers should never give their opinion on specific council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.

10.0 Media Activity Ahead of Meetings

- 10.1 The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All agendas are automatically published on the Council website.
- 10.2 Members of the media are welcome to attend meetings (the part that takes place in open session). During meetings, councillors should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture, rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what can be a complex issue or report.

11.0 Non-Council related Media Activity

- 11.1 Officers and councillors who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-council related organisations must not refer to their Whimple Parish Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-council related organisation.

12.0 Managing Negative Issues

- 12.1 From time to time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully to limit the potential for negative publicity.
- 12.2 Councillors must alert the Parish Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest comes to light. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.
- 12.3 The Parish Clerk and councillors must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

13.0 Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

- 13.1 Should the media (a newspaper or broadcaster) publish/broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

- 13.2 The issue should be discussed with the Parish Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice.
- 13.3 It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain. Each case must be judged individually.
- 13.4 Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by holding hands up, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.

14.0 Emails

Council Email

- 14.1 The Parish Clerk has a specific email address – clerk@whimpleparishcouncil.gov.uk and response to enquiries will be sent as soon as practicable, bearing in mind that the Clerk only works 14 hours a week.
- 14.2 The Parish Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to councillors or external agencies for information and/or action.
- 14.3 All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Parish Clerk.

Councillor Emails

- 14.4 All Whimple Parish Councillors are provided with an official whimpleparishcouncil.gov.uk email address and are expected to use this email account for Council business only.
- 14.5 Individual councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their personal views and, if appropriate, copy to the Parish Clerk. It should be made clear that any such views expressed are made in an individual capacity and not on behalf of the Council.
- 14.6 Any emails sent to the Parish Clerk or councillors in their official capacity will be subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.
- 14.7 Personal information must not be sent on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

15.0 Data Protection

- 15.1 Councillors are expected to abide by the Members' Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council.
- 15.2 As more information becomes available electronically, 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 Members' Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (in extreme cases, this could lead to a criminal investigation).
- 15.3 Councillors should 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.