

Email, Internet & Social Media Policy

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Westbourne Parish Council recognises that the use of internet and electronic mail are essential to the efficiency and effectiveness of the Council's functions. However, these facilities must be used responsibly and lawfully.
- 1.2. The Council further recognises that its website and the use of social media offer potential to enhance its communication with the residents of Westbourne (and further afield) but that there is also potential to damage the Council's reputation.
- 1.3. This policy covers all individuals working at all levels within the Parish Council, including all Councillors and other members of Council Committees, the Parish Clerk and any other employee or volunteers (collectively referred to as staff in this policy). It is recognised that the computers that Councillors and others use are their own and not the property of the Parish Council.

2. Use of Email

- 2.1. The use of email to exchange correspondence requires the same professional standards as other forms of communication. Emails should be friendly in tone and the content respectful and informative. Writing whole words and sentences in capital letters or red type to emphasise points is considered to be 'shouting' and is inappropriate. No email should be flippant, derogatory, defamatory or offensive.
- 2.2. The Parish Clerk and Councillors shall be aware that agreements made by email may have the same status as letters or formal contracts.
- 2.3. It is recommended that emails are retained for no more than twelve months. Those containing important material should be saved to the desktop.
- 2.4. Up to date virus-checking software will be maintained on the Parish Council computer. Even so email attachments or links within emails which might contain viruses should not be opened if they are from an unrecognised sender; they must be deleted. Care should be taken even if the sender is recognised.

3. Data protection

- 3.1. Emails and files attached to them should comply with the Data Protection Act 1998, they must not include sensitive personal data without appropriate password protection.
- 3.2. Councillors should each make one email address available in the public domain and those and the generic Parish Council email address will be published on the Council's website and elsewhere. All other email addresses should be treated as confidential and care taken that private email addresses are not wrongly circulated.
- 3.3. Email to multiple addresses outside of Parish Councillors and the Parish Clerk should

be sent as blind copy, (bcc).

4. Internet

- 4.1. No material should be downloaded from the internet where there is reason to suspect that it might contain a virus.
- 4.2. No material from the internet shall be used without checking whether it is restricted by copyright or licensing laws.
- 4.3. No member of staff shall access offensive material using Westbourne Parish Council facilities.
- 4.4. Computer games or personal software shall not be loaded onto a Westbourne Parish Council computer.

5. Website

- 5.1. Under the direction of the Council the Parish Clerk shall be responsible for maintenance of the website content (either by updating the site personally or instructing the website designer).
- 5.2. Any Parish Councillor with concerns about or suggestions for website content should contact the Parish Clerk.
- 5.3. The website itself is hosted remotely and backed up on a regular basis.

6. Social media

- 6.1. This part of the policy is intended to help the Parish Clerk and Councillors make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as emails, blogs, wikis, social networking websites, podcasts, forums, message boards or comments on web-articles, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other relevant social media websites.
- 6.2. The Council will encourage the use of social media for the purposes of:-
 - Providing and exchanging information about services
 - Supporting local democracy
 - Gathering residents' insights and managing residents' relationships
 - Promoting events within the parish area
 - Supporting community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience
- 6.3. The Parish Council uses the internet for communication through its website, its use of email and its Facebook page. Over time the Parish Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses. Only the Council can decide which social media platforms will be used in the Council's name. When significant changes occur this policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.
- 6.4. The Council has nominated the Parish Clerk as administrator and moderator of the Council's Facebook page and the Clerk will be responsible for posting and monitoring the content on Council pages and ensuring compliance with this policy. As moderator the Parish Clerk has authority, immediately without notice or comment, to remove any posts from the Council's Facebook page if they are deemed to be inflammatory or of a defamatory or libellous nature. Councillors are discouraged from commenting on or expressing personal opinions on the Council's Facebook page and should not be

tempted to respond on the Council's behalf. All posts and responses will be made by the Clerk, in consultation, as appropriate, with the Chairman of the Council and/or the Chairman of the Communications Group.

- 6.5. The Facebook page may be used to:-
- Post notices and minutes of meetings
 - Advertise events and activities
 - Post good news stories
 - Link to appropriate websites or press page if those sites meet the Council's expectations of conduct
 - Advertise vacancies
 - Share information from partners i.e. Police, district council etc.
 - Announce new information appropriate to the Parish Council
 - Post or share information promoting bodies for community benefit such as schools, Scouts, sports clubs and community groups
 - Post other items as the Parish Council sees fit
- 6.6. If a complaint or lengthy enquiry is posted on the Facebook page the Clerk will respond positively but ask the 'poster' to send contact details by direct message so that the matter can be dealt with offline.
- 6.7. Staff and individual Parish Councillors are responsible for what they post. They are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their social media accounts. Staff and Councillors are advised to set up separate social media accounts for their council work to avoid the blurring of boundaries between that and their personal social media activity.
- 6.8. The Facebook page should be checked on a regular basis to ensure that the security settings are in place. Individuals are advised to make regular checks upon the privacy settings of their own social media accounts.
- 6.9. When participating in online communication, staff and Councillors must:-
- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent
 - Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council
 - Never make false or misleading statements
 - Not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. They must protect the good reputation of the Council
 - Be mindful of the information posted on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council
 - Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud'. Use sentence case format, not capital letters, nor write in red to emphasise points
 - Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief should not be published on any social media site
 - Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
 - Not post comments that they would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face
 - Never name an individual third party without written permission to do so
 - Seek permission to publish original photographs or video from the persons or organisations in the video or photographs before they are uploaded.
 - Respect the privacy of other Councillors, staff and residents

- Never post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations such as libel and copyright
 - Spell and grammar check everything
- 6.10. Residents and Parish Councillors should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate. If a matter that is raised on the Facebook page needs further consideration by the Council it may be raised at either the open forum or as a full agenda item. The 'poster' shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case and invited to contact the Clerk direct. Any response agreed by the Council will be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.
- 6.11. Behaviour required by the Members' Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Councillors will bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply. Remarks are easily withdrawn, apologised for and forgotten when made in person, but posting them on the internet means that they have been published in a way that cannot be contained. Online content should be objective, balanced, informed and accurate. Members must be aware that their profile as a Councillor means it is more likely they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking. It must be remembered that communications on the internet are permanent and public. When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the Parish Council would be content with the statement should it be made public.
- 6.12. If staff or Councillors blog or tweet personally and not in their role as a councillor, they must not act, claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council. They should not include web links to official Council websites as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council. Staff and Councillors must not allow their interaction on any websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others. They must not make any derogatory, discriminatory, defamatory or offensive comments about other staff, Councillors, the Council or about the people, businesses and agencies that the Council works with and serves.