

# **WITHAM ST HUGHS PARISH COUNCIL**

## **COMMUNICATIONS POLICY – Updated March 2026**

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### **1. Introduction & Purpose**

This Communications Policy sets out how Witham St Hughs Parish Council (“the Council”) communicates with residents, stakeholders, public authorities, and the media. Its purpose is to ensure that all communication:

- Is accurate, timely, lawful, and respectful
- Reflects the corporate view of the Council
- Supports transparency and public confidence
- Aligns with statutory requirements and best practice

This policy applies to all councillors and employees of the Council.

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### **2. Principles of Communication**

All Council communications must be:

- **Accurate and factual**
  - **Clear and written in plain English**
  - **Timely, relevant, and responsive**
  - **Impartial and non-political**
  - **Compliant with UK GDPR, FOI legislation, and the Code of Conduct**
  - **Respectful, courteous, and professional**
  - **Accessible**, following reasonable steps to ensure clarity for residents of all backgrounds and abilities
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### **3. Legal & Regulatory Framework**

Council communications must comply with:

- Local Government Act 1972
  - Local Government Act 1986 (publicity restrictions)
  - Freedom of Information Act 2000
  - Data Protection Act 2018 / UK GDPR
  - Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960
  - Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities
  - Member Code of Conduct
  - Electoral Commission and Returning Officer guidance during election periods
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### **4. Roles & Responsibilities**

#### **4.1 The Parish Clerk (Proper Officer)**

The Clerk is responsible for:

- Issuing all official communications on behalf of the Council
- Responding to routine enquiries or referring matters to Council
- Managing and updating the website and official digital channels
- Coordinating press statements and media enquiries
- Maintaining records, including FOI and GDPR compliance

#### **4.2 Councillors**

Councillors:

- Must not speak on behalf of the Council unless specifically authorised by Council resolution
- May share information but must avoid expressing personal views that could be mistaken as Council policy
- Must follow the Code of Conduct in all communications, including online
- Should refer formal correspondence and media enquiries to the Clerk

### **4.3 Chair of the Council**

The Chair may act as an authorised spokesperson where agreed by Council, particularly for urgent media enquiries.

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## **5. Responding to Public Enquiries**

### **5.1 Personal Contact (in person or phone)**

- Calls relating to Parish Council services will be handled by the Clerk
- If the relevant person is unavailable, contact details will be taken, and the caller will receive a response as soon as practical.
- For County or District Council matters, the enquirer will be directed to the appropriate authority (LCC or NKDC).
- Staff and councillors should not act as intermediaries for other authorities or provide direct-dial numbers for officers.

### **5.2 Written Enquiries (email or letter)**

- A detailed reply should be provided **within 7 working days**, or a holding response if more time is required.
  - Each enquiry should receive a helpful, factual, and courteous response.
  - Duplicate or repeated correspondence on the same issue may be acknowledged without detailed reply; the Clerk must be informed.
  - Unsolicited or spam emails do not require a response.
  - All written communications may be recoverable under FOI and must therefore be professional.
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## **6. Digital Communications**

### **6.1 Website**

The Council website will be the primary repository for official information, including:

- Agendas and minutes
- Policies and statutory documents
- Financial information required by the Transparency Code
- Council news and announcements

The Clerk is responsible for keeping information accurate and up to date.

### **6.2 Email**

- Councillors and staff should use official Council email accounts where provided.
- Emails are subject to FOI and GDPR; personal accounts must not be used for confidential business.
- Bulk emails must use blind-copying to protect personal data.

### **6.3 Social Media**

The Council's official social media channels will be used to:

- Share information, updates, and notices
- Promote community engagement
- Communicate urgent messages (e.g., safety updates)

Principles:

- Content must be non-political and represent the Council's corporate view
- Only authorised individuals may post on behalf of the Council
- Comments that are defamatory, abusive, or unlawful may be moderated or removed
- Social media must not be used to debate Council decisions or engage in arguments

A separate Social Media Policy details operational rules.

## **6. Media Relations**

- All press enquiries must be referred to the Clerk.

- Press releases must be approved by the Clerk and, where appropriate, shared with councillors.
  - Releases must be factual, non-political, and reflect Council decisions.
  - Councillors may issue their own statements as individuals, but these must **not imply Council endorsement**.
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### **7. Community Engagement**

The Council will use various engagement methods to support transparency and participation, including:

- Public participation sessions at Council meetings
- Website updates
- Online or paper surveys
- Social media updates
- Consultations on major issues

Feedback will be considered by the Council and used to inform decision-making.

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### **8. Purdah (Election Period Restrictions)**

From the publication of the Notice of Election until close of polls:

- The Council must not publish any materials that could influence public support for a candidate or political party.
  - All communication must be strictly factual and non-political.
  - Councillors must not use Council resources to support campaigning.
  - Additional guidance will be issued by the Returning Officer or NALC.
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### **9. Abusive, Threatening, or Unreasonable Contact**

- Staff and councillors are not required to tolerate obscene, abusive, or threatening behaviour.
  - If such behaviour occurs, the caller may be asked to moderate their language.
  - If it continues, the call or interaction may be ended.
  - Written abuse may be acknowledged without a detailed reply.
  - Persistent, vexatious, or threatening behaviour may be escalated appropriately, including to the police.
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### **10. Records, FOI & Data Protection**

- All Council communications—written, electronic, or verbal—may be subject to FOI.
  - Personal data may only be handled in accordance with UK GDPR.
  - Records of official correspondence, decisions, and actions must be maintained appropriately by the Clerk.
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### **11. Review of the Policy**

This policy will be reviewed every **two years** or sooner if required by legislative change, Council decision,

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