

SOUTH WONSTON PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE POLICY

INTRODUCTION

This policy sets out the Parish Council's approach to communications via email and written letter, both internal and external. For other media, please see our Social Media and Facebook Policies. Its purpose is to define the roles of Clerk, Councillors and staff and develop and conduct communications in a lawful, appropriate, effective and transparent way.

ROLE OF THE CLERK

Clerk is the chief point of contact for the Parish Council. It is to her all correspondence should be addressed.

Clerk is the sole keeper of any correspondence addressed to the Parish Council, or any of its committees, sub-committees or working parties.

Clerk is responsible for the creation and maintenance of email lists in compliance with Data Protection Regulations and alone can send authorised communications to prepared lists.

Confidential information must be sent to Clerk initially for approval, with the assistance of the Chair, for circulation amongst Parish Council members.

Irregular, anonymous correspondence or breaches of policy must be notified to Clerk for investigation and action with the assistance of the Chair.

Clerk decides if an item of correspondence is in the public domain in the event of a Freedom of Information request by a member of the public. Freedom of Information correspondence will be answered within twenty working days.

All other correspondence will be answered within ten working days.

While a correspondence is outstanding, no further emails will be accepted from the same correspondent.

Clerk is the nominated Press Officer and, together with the Chair, will clear all press notices from the Parish Council to the media.

ROLE OF COUNCILLORS AND STAFF

Councillors should be mindful of their actions which should always be in accordance with the Code of Conduct. Councillors are responsible for their emails which may be used as legal evidence or be subject to a Freedom of Information request. Councillors must be clear whether they are acting in their council or private role. Communications from a Parish Council stance should always reflect Parish Council decisions and policies.

The Parish Council provides dedicated email addresses to councillors and staff for conducting the proper business of the council.

Private and personal email addresses should not be used for Parish Council purposes. If a sender from outside the council uses a councillor's private email, they should be advised to use the official address.

Messages should not contain any personal information except contact details. They should not impact adversely on the Parish Council or the conduct of its business, for example by expressing a view implying support for a popular community opinion or project before a decision is made (pre-determination).

Sensitive content must be marked "Confidential" and sent to Clerk as above.

Email received with attachments from an unrecognised source must not be opened but reported to Clerk for investigation with the email provider. Anonymous correspondence must likewise be sent on to Clerk as above.

Email from community members should receive an acknowledgement stating the communication will be forwarded to Clerk.

A councillor approached by a contractor should treat their email as above and pass on to Clerk.

RETENTION OR DELETION OF EMAILS

This section should be read in conjunction with the Parish Council's Retention Policy.

Councillors are expected to go through their inbox regularly and delete emails that are no longer relevant. On resignation, they must delete electronic records and destroy hard copy documents including correspondence.

ANONYMOUS CORRESPONDENCE

All anonymous correspondence by letter or email is to be treated in strictest confidence. Clerk may circulate them to councillors with sensitive information redacted but retain the original for inspection in the Parish Council Office. The Parish Council reserves the right to take no action unless there are significant health and safety issues or it is suspected that any allegation could be substantiated. Serious issues must be directed to the relevant authorities (Winchester City Council or Police).

UNFOUNDED AND PERSISTENT HARASSMENT

This section should be read in conjunction with the Parish Council's Complaints Policy and Unreasonably Persistent Complaints and Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy.

Councillors and staff are visible and accessible to all parish residents, which makes them open to harassment, abuse and intimidation. Unacceptable conduct undermines free speech, debate and engagement with the community and can put personal wellbeing, security, human and civil rights at risk. Councillors and staff must have the same protection afforded to all citizens.

The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 defines harassment as a situation in which the victim feels distressed, humiliated, threatened or in actual danger of violence. Letters and emails can be classed as harassing when they are sent continually and have content which is libellous, obscene, repetitious, unanswerable to the correspondent's satisfaction, unjustifiable, aggressive, harmful to staff or councillors and deleterious to the lawful proceedings of the Parish Council. The impact of this behaviour is sufficient grounds for action. A zero-tolerance policy is required. This currently takes the form of the Parish Council's Unreasonably Persistent Complaints and Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy. Throughout the process it will be borne in mind that the complainant may have difficulties and needs which must be taken into account, but it must be made clear that the type of behaviour dealt with in the above policy is not acceptable. Severe cases must be reported to the Police, but more general nuisance and unwanted correspondence is covered by legislation so legal advice may be sought.

RELEVANT LEGISLATION

The Data Protection Act 2018.

The Communications Act 2003.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

The Protection from Harassment Act 1997.

The Malicious Communications Act 1988.

The Public Order Act 1986

The Criminal Damage Act 1971.

Offences Against the Person Act 1861.

The Correspondence Policy will be reviewed and updated annually.