



2017

SHAFTESBURY TOWN COUNCIL

Communications and Media Policy



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COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA POLICY

INTRODUCTION

Shaftesbury Town Council's Communication and Media Policy is based upon three key principles which enable the council to work more effectively. These are:

Communication – directly communicate important and timely messages, news and information, promote events and improve awareness of services by providing direct digital access to them.

Engagement – seek opinions, share conversations and better engage with residents. We can help to improve residents' knowledge and correct misconceptions.

Collaboration – find more efficient ways of working together and sharing information which can change or enhance the perception of the council and that of specific service areas or projects

1 PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for communicating with the media and with the public and is applicable to all staff and councillors.

1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with both the public and the media. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk with media channels and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

2 KEYS AIMS

2.1 The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media – press, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.

2.2 The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to officers and councillors and to background information to assist them in this

role. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

2.3 The Council will bear in mind that not everyone uses social media and that paper communication still plays an important role in engaging with some sectors of the community.

3 THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy:

- “Any publicity describing the Council’s policies and aims [and the provision of services] should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both.”
- “Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council... should be handled with particular care. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although councils should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments.”
- “Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.”
- “... local authorities... should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”

3.2 In particular, officers and councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

3.3 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to media channels. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and take appropriate action.

3.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for officers and councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address, private e-mail address and telephone numbers (although Councillors contact details are in the public domain), annual leave, disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all

these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Town Clerk before any response is made to the media.

3.5 It is illegal to use graphics or photographs without permission. Ensure that anyone giving permission to use an image is the original copyright owner and check the licensing agreement of photographs in any existing archives before use. Do not take or use any photographs of children who appear to be under the age of 18 without permission from a parent or guardian. Permission is non-transferable from a third party, such as a school.

4 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Town Clerk is the main contact with permission to speak to the media. The Town Mayor and the Chairmen of Committees, by the nature of their position are also authorised contacts with the media in consultation with the Town Clerk.

4.2 Statements made by the Town Mayor or the Chairmen of Committees should reflect the Council's opinion and set policies.

4.3 If other councillors are contacted directly by the media for comment, they should liaise with the Town Clerk before responding to the request.

4.4 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council, preferably by confirming with the Town Clerk beforehand.

4.5 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. However, such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks.

4.6 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Town Mayor, the Chairmen of Committees or the Town Clerk. Councillors are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the local press as a means of expressing their personal views.

4.7 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

4.8 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 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.

5 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

5.1 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

5.2 Filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media (and public) is permitted in accordance with Standing Orders and the Council Protocol on the Recording of Meetings which reflect national legislation.

6 ELECTIONS

6.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Councillors and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that Council resources should not be used on publicising individual councillors unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the Council. These extracts from the Code illustrate the main points:-

- Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the council (for example, Town Mayor or Chairman of a committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and personalisation of issues or personal images making should be avoided.”
- “Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor which are relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward their justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals.”
- “The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.

6.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a

member level response to an important event outside the control of the Council. In this situation, councillors holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

7 PRESS RELEASES

7.1 The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of all officers and councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

7.2 All press releases are to be factual, non-political, not written to cause offence and must be in accordance with Council policy.

7.3 All press releases are to be issued by the Town Clerk (but may be drafted by other officers, subject to approval) in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored, having consulted with the Mayor or Chairman of the relevant committee on the proposed wording as appropriate.

7.4 In the restricted period before an election, commonly known as "*purdah*" press releases will not include quotes from Councillors who are due for re-election; this is mainly of relevance to the District and County Council, but it is helpful for town councillors to be mindful of the provision.

8 TOWN COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

8.1 The first point of contact for the Town Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Town Council should be addressed.

8.2 The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.

8.3 No individual Town Councillor should communicate directly with companies/individuals with which the Town Council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries relating to quotes for work or the letting of contracts should be through the Clerk.

8.4 No individual Town Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Town Council (or its committees/sub-committees). [In particular, Town Councillors do not have a right to obtain confidential information/ documentation unless they can demonstrate a “need to know”.]

8.5 All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Town Council, using Council letter-headed paper.

8.6 Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

8.7 Correspondence sent on behalf of the Town Council to the District Council OR County Council shall also be copied to the relevant STC Ward Councillors.

9 AGENDAS FOR TOWN COUNCIL MEETINGS

9.1 In accordance with Paragraph 1 (4) (a) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, agendas will be published no later than 3 clear days before a meeting (this excludes the day of publication and the day of the meeting – Saturdays are included within this calculation).

9.2 Where the Clerk or a Town Councillor wishes fellow councillors to receive matters “for information only” in respect of items on the agenda, this will be circulated via the Clerk. Note: This applies to items on the agenda only. Town Councillors are entitled to share any other information they wish, with their colleagues. In these circumstances, it can be helpful for the Clerk to be copied in.

9.3 Copies of agendas for Council and Committee meetings will be sent to all local media and Shaftesbury District and County Councillors.

10 FILMING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS

This is a rapidly growing area that is affecting local councils. The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 makes provision for the filming of Local Council meetings (or a committee or sub-committee of the Council).

It is unlikely that many local councils will choose to have their meetings filmed. If they did and there was a particular agenda item or issue likely to raise press and public interest, the Council would be aware of this and therefore be prepared for the situation. If the Council wished to pursue this, the cost implications would need to be taken into account; for example, equipment, “up-skilling” of someone to undertake the filming, editing and dissemination of the film or paying an outside contractor to perform this role.

There are points to consider if a Council meeting is filmed by a member of the press or public; or if the Council itself is filming the meeting:

- Think image! Take into account the clothing worn by councillors, body language, verbal language, green credentials as well as how the Council may appear. Does it look like the ‘Vicar of Dibley’ or ‘Yes Minister’ or an effective decision-making group that demonstrates its worth to the electorate as well as to the general sceptics about the value of local councils? This is particularly relevant if a third party from the press or public films the meeting.
- Think copyright! Is there anything to be shown which infringes copyright? This is relevant if a third party from the press or public films the meeting.
- Think advertising! Is there anything on show which could be perceived as advertising or demonstrating a preference?
- Remember Standing Orders when members of the public are invited to speak. Does the member of public want to be filmed, recorded or named, or none of the above?

11 SOCIAL MEDIA

11.1 The definition of social media continues to evolve as platforms and technologies develop. On the whole, it refers to any web-based practices which can be used to share content. This policy applies to the use of all social media by any Councillors and employees of Shaftesbury Town Council.

11.2 It is a key communications tool for the Town Council and highlights a commitment to openness and transparency.

11.3 Anything written on a Shaftesbury Town Council social media channel reflects on the organisation, but given the relaxed style of social media, it is important not to appear overly formal.

11.4 The Projects Officer is designated as the administrator of the Town Council's Social Media channels including the website and Twitter and all postings should be directed through this officer. As a general rule any postings should only reflect information of content which it would be acceptable to publish to the general public in other council communications.

11.5 The Town Council is under no obligation to moderate posts or comments made by the public on its social media channels. However, the council would not want to be seen to be endorsing comments which are defamatory, false or misleading; insulting, threatening or abusive; obscene or of a sexual nature; offensive, racist, sexist, homophobic or discriminatory against religions or other groups; promoting illegal activity; or intended to deceive. Such posts to Shaftesbury Town Council Social Media pages will be removed.

11.6 Occasional negative posts cannot be avoided, but how they are dealt with has implications for the Town Council's reputation. They should not be ignored, although sometimes no answer is required if it is a rhetorical question, a repetition of an earlier posting, or a post designed to provoke.

11.7 As posts are public it is better to answer them in public, although occasionally it may help to take them onto a private channel.

11.8 While the private accounts of authority employees and Councillors are their own business, it is still possible for the content posted on them to affect their professional standing and/or that of the Council. To mitigate this risk Councillors/ Officers may not wish include any reference to, or post comments about, the council, job roles, colleagues, or partner organisations. If, however references to your employment or connection with the council are made on a personal social media profile, please ensure the following actions:

- Declare somewhere on your page or biography that the views expressed are yours alone
- Do not bring the authority into disrepute
- Do not reveal any potentially confidential or sensitive information about the authority that you may have come across in your work or role for the Council.
- Do not use any council-owned images or logos
- Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or staff.

- Do not make offensive comments about the authority, councillors, officers, colleagues or members of the public as this is a disciplinary offence

APPENDIX A - UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES WHEN USING SOCIAL MEDIA.

1. Be human Be approachable in your language and tone.
2. Be engaging Respond to questions and talk back when you can move the conversation on or help.
3. Be professional Remember that you are representing your authority.
4. Share and say where it came from You can share what others have posted but it is polite to acknowledge and attribute where this has come from.
5. You can't control, only contribute You cannot stop conversation amongst residents. You can only contribute to it.
6. Content is king By creating sharable and engaging content you can contribute to the conversation and be heard.
7. Be authentic Don't try and pretend to be something you are not. Ghosted accounts are not authentic.
8. Be trusting We cannot monitor every conversation, letter, phone call or email. Trust your staff and you will gain far more than you will lose.
9. Be strategic; Plan ahead – who do you want to engage with, why and how? What do you want to achieve?

APPENDIX B - Social media policy - Do's and don'ts template from the Local Government Association.

This policy has been developed by the LGA following a survey of over 120 local government councillors and officers up and down the country. It is intended to open the door to social media use in your local authority rather than block it. If you stick to this one simple rule you won't go too far wrong:

Don't post any message on social media that you wouldn't happily say in a public meeting.

LGA Policy template: Do's and don'ts at a glance

Do:

- talk to residents, staff and others. And do answer their questions (quickly and honestly)
- trust your teams and staff to use social media

- be responsible at all times
- be respectful at all times, too
- innovate – different approaches work for different people
- have a personality – corporate speak or just issuing press releases won't work well on social media
- share other people's helpful content and links
- credit other people's work, ideas and links
- listen (social media is designed to be a two-way channel, just like any good conversation)
- ask your own questions. Seek feedback from your residents (but make sure you share the results with them)
- have a rota where appropriate – share the load and you'll get more from your accounts
- adhere to your existing HR policies – you don't need a separate HR policy especially for social media
- talk to your communications team – they are there to help you
- and more than anything, do use social media in the spirit in which it was intended – to engage, openly and honestly.

Don't

- broadcast or talk at people. Your residents will soon spot broadcasts and respond accordingly
- block social media – social media is not a risk, blocking its use is a risk
- try to cover up mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run
- build accounts and just hope people will come – sometimes it is best to go to the places where your audiences are already having conversations
- assume that social media will look after itself – you will need to invest time, enthusiasm and energy to make it work. And don't leave your accounts unattended for long spells • post content which will embarrass your council or yourself
- ignore legal advice, it's there to help you

- think that a disclaimer in your bio will save you from potential legal action, it won't
- expect your staff to make do with old technology which can be a barrier to effective working
- share your passwords with anyone other than your communications leads
- forget that social media is 24/7 – just because you leave at 5.00 pm doesn't mean the world stops or that residents won't be active. If your account is only staffed 9-5 then you should say so on your profile.