



Much Wenlock Town Council

COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA POLICY

INTRODUCTION

Much Wenlock Town Council ("the Council") is accountable to members of the public and is committed to the provision of accurate information about its governance, decisions and activities. To this end, all communication will be conveyed in an open and straightforward manner, using various media.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AND RESTRICTIONS

This policy is subject to the Council's obligations which are set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018, other legislation which may apply and the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations. The Council's Financial Regulations and relevant Standing Orders referenced in this policy are available on the Council's website or via the Council's Publication Scheme.

The Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Council's Standing Orders, under contract or by common law. Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the Code of Conduct adopted by the Council, a copy of which is available via the Council's Publication Scheme and available to download from the Council's website.

GENERAL COMMUNICATION

The Town Clerk is the Proper Officer of the Town Council and is responsible for formal communication between the Council, the press and other media, and members of the public. However, this does not prevent individual councillors from communicating with the press and public, but they must ensure that there is clarity in their communication so there is a clear distinction between **individual opinions** and those approved by the Town Council. The Town Clerk may contact the media if the Council wants to provide information, a statement or other material about the Council.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Through a positive and transparent approach Councillors and staff will actively engage with the community and the local media to promote the Council's decisions and plans. The Town Clerk will work with the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and appropriate chairs of committees and sub-committees to agree the content of pertinent information where necessary.

Councillors who wish to communicate directly with the press and public, either orally, or via their own personal email or social media accounts, should make it clear whether they are speaking as a Councillor or as a private individual. If Councillors wish to express their own views directly with the media, they should not seek to undermine the Town Council if their views are different to the Council's corporate position. If Councillors wish to take this course, it might be prudent to seek a briefing with the Town Clerk beforehand. No communication should be made that is in any way damaging to the interests or reputation of the Town Council or which reveals confidential matters, or information likely to endanger the health or safety of a Councillor, employee, or any other individual.

The Town Council's Standing Order no: 22(a) states that requests from the press or other media for an oral or written comment or statement from the Council, its councillors or staff, shall be handled in accordance with the Council's policy in respect of dealing with the press and/or other media (this policy). The Council will co-operate with the media and others seeking information on the Council's activities or ambitions.

The Town Clerk is responsible for the preparation of notices of Council meetings, agendas and minutes and for the development and maintenance of the Council's website so that it remains current.

All correspondence addressed to the Town Council will be actioned by the Town Clerk or other officer. Information that needs to be considered by the Town Council, or one of its committees, will be placed on the first relevant agenda after its receipt. Other relevant information will be emailed to Members in between meetings for information only.

METHOD OF COMMUNICATION

The Council may use any of the following methods to communicate with members of the public and the press. Communication may be undertaken by other members of staff under the supervision of the Town Clerk. The message must be consistent across all channels of communication used.

ACTIVITY	METHOD OF COMMUNICATION	RESPONSIBILITY
Newsletter	Wenlock Herald (monthly)	Town Clerk
	Website	Town Clerk
Approved and draft minutes	Website	Town Clerk
Agendas	Website/notice board/social media	Town Clerk
Supporting information for meetings (non-confidential)	Website	Town Clerk
Council policies/procedures	Website	Town Clerk
Annual Town Meeting	Using themes approved by the Town Council, the Chairman will be responsible for presenting the Annual Report at the Annual Town Meeting	Town Clerk/Mayor
Press releases	Website/notice board/social media/local press	Town Clerk
Annual external audit	Website/notice board	RFO (following adoption by the Town Council)
Adopted Annual Accounts	Website/notice board/social media	RFO
Councillor vacancies	Website/notice board/social media	Town Clerk
Financial statements and other financial information	Website	RFO

Other information will be provided in accordance with the Council's adopted Publication Scheme.

WEBSITE / NOTICE BOARD

The Council's website will be the main information hub and channel for communicating details about the Town Council. The website will also act as a channel for other information such as local news and events, consultation details, road closures and anything that is of general interest to the local community including links to other websites. The website will be regularly updated.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media channels will be used to supplement the information provided on the Council's website, to share news and to promote activities and events. These media will help to build social capital so that there is a two-way channel between the Town Council and members of the public.

Social media accounts can currently only be created using a personal account. This requires extra care and awareness of who has been given responsibilities and access to the log in details; a memorandum etc should be agreed that sets out procedures for relinquishing participation in that account.

An official account on any social media website may only be set up with consent from the Council. Only authorised staff may use these accounts to post online and access to the account is strictly limited. The Council's social media accounts are managed and monitored by staff under the supervision of the Town Clerk. All information published on the internet must comply with the Council's confidentiality policy and data protection legislation.

The Council's social media accounts are monitored during working hours and, if appropriate, staff will endeavour to respond as quickly as possible to questions received via social networking sites. However, an immediate response to posts from members of the public cannot always be provided. All formal requests, comments, enquiries or complaints should be emailed directly to the council office or submitted using the contact form on the website.

Social Media Moderation Policy

Whilst the Council supports open discussion, inappropriate comments from members of the public will not be tolerated and will be removed and the reason given. The Council Facebook page is reactively moderated. The Council cannot accept responsibility for the content of any comment.

The Council reserves the right to remove comments on Facebook that:

- Contain abusive, obscene, indecent or offensive language, or link to obscene or offensive material
- Contain swear words or other sorts of profanity
- Are completely removed from the topic of conversation or are not relevant to the item posted
- Contain abusive language towards an individual involved in the thread, other organisations or the page administrator
- Constitute spam or promote or advertise products, except where it is for an event, publication or similar item that has direct relevance to the subject of discussion.
- Are designed to cause nuisance to the page administrator or other users.

For serious and/or persistent breaches of the moderation policy, the Council reserves the right to prevent users from posting further comments.

If a genuine complaint is posted, the complainant will be directed to the Council's Complaints Procedure, which can be viewed on the Council's website or is available from the Town Clerk. Comments and enquiries will only be responded to during normal office hours. **Personal information should not be conveyed through social media.**

Use of Photos and Video

Only the Clerk or other staff have permission to upload photos and videos. The appropriate permissions must be obtained for all imagery.

Personal Accounts on Social Media

Staff need to use social networking in a way that does not conflict with the terms of their contract of employment. The absence of, or lack of, explicit reference to a specific website or service does not limit the extent of the application of this policy. Where no policy or guidelines exist, employees should use their professional judgement and take the most prudent action possible. If the Council is referred to in a way that is deemed defamatory or confidential information is disclosed, it reserves the right to report the comment and request that it be removed.

Councillors are at liberty to set up accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view. Councillors should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libelous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language.

COMMUNICATION BY EMAIL, INTERNET, TELEPHONE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Communications via email, and internet usage undertaken in the name of the Council or on Council systems, carry inherent risks such as:

- potential defamation
- spreading of viruses, including Trojans which can steal data
- breach of confidentiality
- accepting files from sources in online chat rooms which could bypass firewalls or email filters
- breach of contract
- breach of copyright
- breach of data protection legislation
- breach of privacy and unlawful discrimination
- the reputation of the Council.

COMMUNICATION BY EMAIL

When conducting Council business, employees and Town Councillors should use their official Council email accounts. Council email accounts should not be used for private business. All employees and Town Councillors must follow the procedure outlined below when sending and receiving emails on behalf of the Town Council.

- all messages must use appropriate business language
- a waiver clause will be included and employees must include a waiver clause at the end of each email message

- the circulating of offensive, indecent, or obscene material, or anything which breaches the Equal Opportunities Policy is strictly prohibited
- confidential material should not be disclosed
- only attachments from a trusted source may be downloaded on Council IT equipment
- ensure that the address of the recipient is correct before sending emails
- ensure that a 'reply to all' is appropriate
- ensure that personal email addresses are not passed on without permission
- in bulk emails, ensure that the recipient email addresses are hidden
- ensure that essential files are saved before deleting the message in which they were received.

COMMUNICATION BY TELEPHONE

All employees must follow the procedure outlined below when using the Council's telephone:

- answer all calls by stating the name of the Town Council
- be polite at all times
- do not be rude or abrupt to callers
- do not use offensive language
- check the telephone message service frequently for messages from callers and respond in a timely manner.

MEETINGS

1. Agendas for Council meetings will be accompanied by sufficient supporting information to enable councillors to make informed decisions and for a reasonable member of the public to understand. Confidential information will be excluded. Agendas and supporting papers will be issued by email if the Councillor has given agreement, and as hard copies on request, in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders. All councillors will also receive agendas by email.
2. Supporting information will also be published on the Council's website at the same time as the agenda to which it relates. Draft minutes for all Council meetings will be published on the Council's website as soon as they have been prepared, with the proviso that they cannot be considered accurate until approved.
3. Meetings of the Council and its committees are open to the public unless the meeting resolves to exclude them because their presence at the meeting is prejudicial to the public interest due to the confidential nature of the business or other special reason(s) stated in the resolution. In accordance with the Council's Standing Orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting of the council and its committees if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.
4. Where a meeting of the Council and its committees includes an opportunity for public participation, members of the public and representatives of the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Council's Standing Orders.
5. The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a meeting of the Council and its committees (which includes e.g. using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums, or social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) which enables a person not at the meeting to see, hear or be given commentary about the meeting is permitted, unless (i) the meeting has resolved to hold all or part of the meeting without the public present or (ii) such activities disrupt the proceedings or (iii) paragraph 9 below applies.
6. The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a child or vulnerable adult at a Council or committee meeting is not permitted unless an adult responsible for them has given permission.
7. Oral reporting or commentary about a Council or committee meeting by a person who is present at the meeting is not permitted if this interferes with the conduct or business of the meeting.
8. The Council shall, as far as it is practicable, provide reasonable facilities for anyone taking a report of a Council or committee meeting and for telephoning their report at their own expense.
9. The Council's Standing Orders will confirm if attendance by the public, their participation, photographing, recording, filming or other reporting is permitted at a meeting of a sub-committee.

Confidentiality and Meetings

There are few cases where there is good reason to exclude the public and press from Council meetings or to impose secrecy upon Members. However, in accordance with the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 and the Local Government Act 1972, ss100 and 102 the following are examples of business which should not be discussed when members of the public are present:

- a) Engagement, terms of service, conduct and dismissal of employees (all staffing matters)
- b) Terms of tenders, and proposals and counter-proposals in negotiations for contracts
- c) Preparation of cases in legal proceedings
- d) The early stages of any dispute.

REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

Council information will be made available to members of the public in accordance with the Council's adopted 'Publication Scheme'.

In compliance with Standing Order no. 20, requests for information held by the Council shall be handled in accordance with the Council's policy in respect of handling requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Correspondence from, and notices served by, the Information Commissioner shall be addressed by the Proper Officer and referred to the Council when appropriate. The Council shall have the power to do anything to facilitate compliance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

In accordance with Standing Order no. 11, neither the Town Clerk, nor councillors, will disclose confidential information that is exempt under the Freedom of Information Act. The agenda and its supporting papers, and the minutes from a meeting where confidential or sensitive information is discussed, shall not disclose or otherwise undermine such information which, for special reasons, is not in the public interest.

The Council will seek to improve its communications work through renewal and enhanced use of its website, social media and digital approaches to sharing information, alongside making hard copies available.

PURDAH

In the six-week run up to an election – local or general – councils have to be very careful not to do or say anything that could be viewed in any way to support any political party or candidate. This period is known as purdah. The Council will continue to publish important service announcements but will monitor and, if necessary, remove responses on social media if they are overtly party political.

Reviewed and approved 11th May 2023