



COMMUNICATION POLICY

1. Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define roles and responsibilities within Melksham Town Council and give guidelines on external communications, contact with the media and effective use of social media.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to deal with issues that may arise and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated.

This policy relates to all communications issued by Melksham Town Council. It is not designed to mandate any communications issued by elected members in their own name. Members should be aware that they are not able to speak on behalf of the Town Council without a specific mandate from the Council or through an Authorised Officer.

Responsibilities

Only the Town Clerk, Authorised Officers and the Town Mayor are permitted to speak on behalf of Melksham Town Council to the press. Such officers will be identified and appointed by Full Council.

Additionally, individual members of Council may speak to the press relating to motions or actions they have been directly involved in as a Town Councillor. Such members are reminded that when representing the Council, they should always be supportive of the Town Council's adopted policies/decisions.

This by no means stops councillors from speaking to the press in their own name but they must make it clear that they are not representing the Town Council when doing so.

2. Key Aims

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions; this accountability can be managed, in part, through effective two-way communications. The media is crucially important in conveying information to the community and, as such, the Council must maintain positive,

constructive media relations and work with the media to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council, and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.

It is important that the media has access to the Council and to background information to assist them in giving accurate accounts to the public. To balance this, the Council reserves the right to defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public is properly informed of all the relevant facts.

Melksham Town Council acknowledges social media as a useful communication tool. However, clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that its use does not expose the Council to security risks, reputational damage or breach of the Data Protection Act.

3. The Legal Framework

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.

The Town Council's Standing Orders and The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 should be adhered to.

Town Council Standing Orders – Admission of the public and press to meetings

The Public and Press shall be admitted to all meetings of the Council and its Committees, which may however temporarily exclude the public or the press or both, by means of the following resolution: -

“That in view of the confidential nature of the business about to be transacted, it is advisable in the public interest that the public and press be excluded, and they are instructed to withdraw.”

If a member of the press or public interrupts the proceedings at any meeting, the Chair may, after warning, order that he/she be removed from the meeting room and/or that part of the room open to the public be cleared. The Chair may adjourn the meeting for such a period as is necessary to restore order.

The Town Council would appreciate notification of any audio or video recordings or photographs planned to be taken of the meeting in order to assist and facilitate where appropriate. Please refer to the “Audio recording, filming, photographing and reporting of Council and Committee Meetings Policy.”

4. External Communications and Working with the Media

Authorised Officers and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the media. If such disclosures do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible, with appropriate action taken.

When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from the Council's solicitor before any response is made.

There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Council that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Member contact details are in the public domain), and 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 or in their absence, their designated deputy before any response is made to the media.

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; such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. Such correspondence would usually come from the Town Clerk, or in their absence their designated deputy, or the Town Mayor/Deputy Mayor. However, all such correspondence should be approved by the Town Clerk or their designated deputy before being released.

5. Attendance of Media at Council Meetings

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media upon request.

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

6. Press Releases

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 staff and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

Authorised Officers should prepare all press releases, however as per above, input is welcomed from all staff and members, 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.

7. Notices of Meetings

The Council noticeboards, website and its social media accounts will be used to convey information on matters of interest such as, advertising meeting notices, events, latest news and general public information. They will be updated regularly by officers.

8. Social Media

For the purposes of this policy, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums, wikis and any sites which may emerge after the creation of this policy where Melksham Town Council could be represented.

The following risks have been identified with social media use (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Virus or other malware infection from an infected site.
- Disclosure of confidential information.
- Damage to the Council's reputation.
- Social engineering attacks (also known as phishing).
- Bullying or witch-hunting.
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.

Social media sites will be monitored to mitigate these risks to ensure:

- A consistent and corporate approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media.
- Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media.
- Users operate within existing policies, guidelines and existing legislation.
- The Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with this guidance. Social media sites are in the public domain and officers must ensure the reliability and be confident of the nature of the information published. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without consent, used in different contexts or further distributed.

From time to time, the Council may have to respond to negative issues and may become involved in drawn out conversations on social media. Members and Officers must alert the Town Clerk or, in their absence, their designated deputy as soon as practicable, so that the situation can be managed effectively and efficiently to minimise negative publicity.

Council social media must not be used for party political purposes or specific party political campaigning. Officers must not seek to promote councillors' social media accounts.

9. Urgent Situations

In the case of an urgent letter or press release being required in advance of a Council or Committee meeting, this may be issued by the Town Clerk or, in their absence, their designated deputy, with the agreement of the Town Mayor, or relevant Committee Chair following circulation of a draft version to other Members for comment.

In the case of urgent actions being required in the absence of the Members and Officers with specific roles and responsibilities under this policy, the following delegations shall apply:

- a) the Deputy Town Mayor of the Council may act in the absence of the Town Mayor;
- b) the Vice Chair of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chair;
- c) the Town Clerk or, in their absence, their designated deputy may act in the absence of the Town Mayor or Deputy Town Mayor of The Council.

Reviewed and Adopted by Full Council on 18 March 2024

To be reviewed April 2025