

MALMESBURY TOWN COUNCIL

COMMUNICATION POLICY

(as amended by Policy & Resources Committee 6th December 2016)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Malmesbury Town Council is committed to engaging with key stakeholders both internally and externally in order to improve the local community and enhance the lives of the residents who live here through accurate and effective communications.
- 1.2 Communication comes in many forms and across multiple media and this policy considers this within its content, and although new and emerging media may not be mentioned herein, the principles of positive and effective communication remain the same.
- 1.3 The press and social media offer exciting and innovative ways for Malmesbury Town and its Council to thrive. Participating in them is a good and effective way to expand and elevate the Town and Council's presence in the community, and communicate information to our constituency.

2. Purpose

- 2.1 The purpose of this policy is to define roles and responsibilities within Malmesbury Town Council and give guidelines on external communications, contact with the media and effective use of social media.
- 2.2 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 communications should be handled, how to deal with issues that may arise and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated.

3. Key Aims

- 3.1 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.

- 3.2 It is important that the media has access to the Clerk/Members 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.
- 3.3 Malmesbury 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.

4. Legal Framework and Standing Orders

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 As a Council adherence should be made to The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014.
- 4.3 Malmesbury Town Council has Standing Orders which it expects its Councillors to abide by.

5. External Communications and Working with the Media

- 5.1 The Town Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- 5.2 Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible, with appropriate action taken.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Town Clerk and Members 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 before any response is made to the media.
- 5.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Town Clerk, Town Mayor or the Chairs of Committees are authorised to make contact with the media.
- 5.6 Statements made by the Town Clerk, Town Mayor or Chairs of Committees should reflect the Council's opinion.
- 5.7 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council and must ask that these opinions be clearly reported as personal views.

- 5.8 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. All correspondence must come from the Town Clerk.
- 5.9 The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.
- 5.10 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media upon request.

6. Notices, Meetings and Minutes

- 6.1 The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by officers, under the direction of the Town Clerk, or delegated authority of the Town Clerk.
- 6.2 Council noticeboards and website are used for advertising meeting notices.
- 6.3 Social media will be used for advertising meeting notices, events and delivering general public information notices.

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 the Town Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 7.2 The Town Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Town Clerk 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.

8. Urgent Situations

- 8.1 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, with the agreement of the Town Mayor, or relevant Committee Chair following circulation of a draft version to other Members for comment.
- 8.2 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:
- i. the Deputy Town Mayor of the Council may act in the absence of the Town Mayor;
 - ii. the Vice Chair of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chair;
 - iii. the Town Clerk may act in the absence of the Town Mayor or Deputy Town Mayor of the Council

9. Seven Principles of Conduct in Public Life

9.1 Malmesbury Town Councillors are minded to abide by the seven Nolan principles which apply to them when in office.

- i. **Selflessness:** you should act in the public interest
- ii. **Integrity:** you should not put yourself under any obligations to others, allow them improperly to influence you or seek benefit for yourself, family, friends or close associates
- iii. **Objectivity:** you should act impartially, fairly and on merit
- iv. **Accountability:** you should be prepared to submit to public scrutiny necessary to ensure accountability
- v. **Openness:** you should be open and transparent in your actions and decisions unless there are clear and lawful reasons for non-disclosure
- vi. **Honesty:** you should always be truthful
- vii. **Leadership:** as a councillor, you should promote, support and exhibit high standards of conduct and be willing to challenge poor behaviour.

10. Compliance with The Code of Conduct

10.1 The Code applies whenever you are doing anything as a Councillor. The general obligations under the Code are:

- a) Treat others with respect
- b) Do not conduct yourself in a manner which could bring you, as a Councillor, or the Town Council, into disrepute
- c) Do not breach any aspect of the Equality Act – do not discriminate on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, or pregnancy
- d) Do not bully, or intimidate or attempt to intimidate anyone who may speak against you in relation to failing to comply with the Code
- e) Do not disclose information given to you in confidence, or which is of a confidential nature, unless you have permission or disclosure is in the public interest or you are required to disclose it by law

11. General guidelines when communicating

11.1 The following are meant as general guidelines to be followed when communicating at all levels, and particularly around the use of social media.

11.2 Treat people with respect and protect the reputation of the Council

Once elected, you are seen by the public as a Councillor. You must think of yourself as a Councillor first, and as a private individual second. Your audience needs to know whether you are 'speaking' as a Town Councillor or as a private individual. It is important for the public, for the Council and for you as an individual to clarify the capacity in which you are speaking so as to avoid confusion and manage expectations. You will be perceived as a Councillor and not as a private individual if you are talking about community issues.

As a Councillor, you will be breaching the Code if you say anything or act in a way which damages the reputation of the Council. Always treat the public and other Councillors with respect.

11.3 Respect your audience

Show consideration for other people's views on topics that could be offensive or inflammatory, such as politics or religion. Equally, care should be taken to avoid engagement in conduct that would be considered unacceptable such as using slurs of any kind, personal insults or obscenities.

11.4 Speak knowledgeably and politely

Make sure that your communications reflect your level of expertise, and limit your comments to your area of knowledge. Before posting content, take the time to review the context and what others have said, to be sure you are contributing in an appropriate way.

11.5 Be engaging and interactive

Try to stimulate interest in the work that you and the Council are doing, and always ask whether your contribution adds value. If what you are posting helps others, you are adding value. Equally, if your contribution enhances the sense of community surrounding Malmesbury, or improves the image of our Council and its activities, it is adding value. Participate as well as promote.

11.6 Do not be argumentative

Engaging in arguments can tarnish your credibility and reputation, and by association, that of Malmesbury Town Council. If you choose to disagree with someone, do so respectfully and objectively. If you speak negatively in any way, do not disparage beyond stating the facts to make your point. Be professional, especially when accepting criticism.

11.7 Respond to mistakes quickly

If you say or write something in error, act quickly to correct it. Your credibility is judged by your accuracy and your willingness to recognise and fix your mistakes. Be upfront and open about doing so – we can all make mistakes.

11.8 Respect third party rights and confidentiality

Make sure you are not publishing confidential information, or images or documents to which you do not own the copyright, without permission. If in doubt, do not publish, and make sure you credit any sources to avoid plagiarism.

11.9 Respond to communications appropriately

When replying to email communications, think twice about whether you want to "reply all" or whether what you have to say is better suited to one to one dialogue.

11.10 Demonstrate collective responsibility

Finally, remember that although we all have strong opinions, once we as a Town Council make a decision, we must all stand behind that decision. The Town Council is its own legal entity and, once a decision is made, there is no room for individual opinion that contravenes the collective decision.

12. Social Media

12.1 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 Malmesbury Town Council could be represented.

12.2 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.
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.

12.3 Councillors are advised to use social media to ensure:

- a consistent and corporate approach is adopted and maintained at all times,
- council information remains secure and is not compromised,
- they operate within existing policies, guidelines and existing legislation,
- the Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected,
- the principles of the Code on Conduct are complied with.

12.4 Councillors are advised to use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with this guidance. Social media sites are in the public domain and councillors 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.

12.5 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 as soon as practicable, so that the situation can be managed effectively and efficiently to minimise negative publicity.

12.6 Council social media must not be used for party political purposes or specific party political campaigning.

12.7 Officers must not seek to promote councillors' social media accounts during Purdah, the pre-election period, when more stringent conditions are in force and certain actions are forbidden by law.

13. Technology

- 13.1 Technology and social media are moving faster than the law can keep up. Therefore it is best to exercise common sense and discretion as new situations arise so as to avoid any legal implications at a later date.