

MONMOUTH TOWN COUNCIL

COMMUNICATION & SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Monmouth Town Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders.

It will do this in a variety of ways, including the use of press releases, the council's website, customer service, marketing material, consultation, the Annual Report, how councillors interact as ward members and council documents such as agendas and letters.

This strategy will look at how the council can develop and improve its communications with residents and other stakeholders.

The overall aim is that council communications should be a two-way process; to give people the information to understand accurately what we do, so they can make informed decisions, and to get information from residents and stakeholders so MTC can understand their needs.

MTC's Communication & Social 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.
- Engagement – seek opinions, share conversations and better engage with residents in order 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.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for interacting with the media and with the public through social media channels.

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.

POLICY STATEMENT

This policy is intended to help employees including the Clerk/ RFO and employees (collectively referred to as employees in this policy), Councillors and volunteers make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as blogs, social networking websites, forums, message boards, or comments on web articles, such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and emails.

This policy outlines the standards required by employees, Councillors and volunteers to observe when using social media and emails, the circumstances in which the Council will monitor the use of social media and the action that will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

Scope of the Policy

All employees, Councillors and volunteers are expected to comply with this policy always to protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the Council.

Breach of this policy by employees and Councillors may be dealt with under the adopted Code of Conduct or Disciplinary Procedure and, in serious cases, may be treated as gross misconduct leading to summary dismissal in the case of employees and in the case of councillors referred to the Ombudsman for action.

Responsibility for Implementation of the Policy

The Council has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this policy.

The Clerk and Town Mayor is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the operation of this policy and making recommendations for changes to minimise risks to our work and reputation.

All employees, Councillors and volunteers should ensure that they take the time to read and understand this policy. Any breach of it should be reported to the clerk and Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Council.

Questions regarding the content or application of this policy should be directed to the Clerk or Chair of the Council.

KEY AIMS

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 policies and priorities.

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 members 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.

The most important drivers of council reputation among local residents are:

- perceived quality of services overall
- perceived value for money
- media coverage
- direct communications
- council performance
- clean, green and safe environment

If the council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its communications policy.

The council's communications will:

- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence levels.
- raise awareness of services provided by the council.
- raise the profile of Monmouth as a hub for business and tourism.
- support councilors in their role as community representatives.
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) audiences.
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the public standing or integrity of the council.

MTC's vision is that its residents will:

- know what services the council provides and the quality of service they can expect from us.
- feel confident and satisfied with our services, and their costs.
- understand how to get involved with, or influence, our work.

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. 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 and councillors 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, 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 leaked to media channels. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and take appropriate action.

There are several personal privacy issues for officers and members 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 Member 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.

It is illegal to use graphics or photographs without permission of the Council. 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.

CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

When responding to approaches from the media, the Town Clerk is usually 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.

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

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

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

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.

Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Town Mayor, or the Chairperson of Committees or the Town

Clerk. Members are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the Local Press as a means of expressing their personal views.

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

ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available. Filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media is permitted in accordance with Standing Orders and the Council Protocol on the Recording of Meetings.

ELECTIONS

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Members and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that Council resources should not be used on publicising individual members unless it is relevant to the 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 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.

In line with practice elsewhere, 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 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, members holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

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 an issue. It is the responsibility of all officers and members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

All press releases are to be factual, non-political and not written to cause offence.

Using social media sites in the name of the Council

Only the Clerk in consultation with the Chair is permitted to post material on the Council website and social media.

Using social media

The importance of the internet in shaping public thinking about the Council and community is recognised, as is the importance of employees, Councillors and volunteers joining in and helping shape local government conversation and direction through interaction in social media.

Before using social media on any matter which might affect the interests of the Council, ensure that:

- a) All employees and Councillors have read and understood this policy
- b) All employee’s, councillors and volunteers must have sought and gained prior written approval to do so from the Full Council and they must also have sent any planned communication to the clerk first.

Rules for use of social media

Whenever permitted to use social media in accordance with this policy, the following general rules must be adhered to:

Do not upload, post or forward a link to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content.

Any employee, Councillor or volunteer who feels that they have been harassed or bullied or are offended by material posted or uploaded by a colleague onto a social media website should inform the Chairman/Clerk.

Never disclose commercially sensitive, personal, private or confidential information. If unsure whether information to be shared falls within one of these categories, this should be discussed beforehand with the Chairperson/Clerk.

Before including a link to a third-party website, confirm that the third party's consent has been given and check that any terms and conditions of that website permit the link to it.

When making use of any social media platform, its terms of use must be read and complied with.

Do not escalate heated discussions, try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations.

Do not discuss employees or refer to staff without their prior approval.

Always consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g. politics and religion.

Do not publish personal contact details where they can be accessed and used widely, and never publish anyone else's personal contact details.

Monitoring use of social media websites

Employees and Councillors should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether accessed for council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against employees and Councillors under the Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure.

Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances, constitute a criminal offence or otherwise give rise to legal liability against the Council and its employees.

A serious case of emailing, uploading, posting, forwarding or posting a link to any of the following types of material on a social media website, whether in a professional or personal capacity, will possibly amount to gross misconduct (this list is not exhaustive):

- a) material in breach of copyright or other intellectual property rights, or which invades the privacy of any person
- b) pornographic material (that is, writing, pictures, films and video clips of a sexually explicit or arousing nature)
- c) a false and defamatory statement about any person or organisation
- d) material which is offensive, obscene
- e) material which is criminal, discriminatory, derogatory or may cause embarrassment to the Council, members, or employees
- f) confidential information about the Council or anyone else
- g) any other statement which is likely to create any liability (whether criminal or civil, and whether for employees or the Council)

Any such action will be addressed under the Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure and for employees may result in summary dismissal. And for councillors will result in a referral to the ombudsman.

Where evidence of misuse is found, a more detailed investigation may be undertaken in accordance with the Council's Disciplinary and complaint investigation Procedure involving the examination and disclosure of monitoring records to those nominated to undertake the investigation and any witnesses involved in the investigation. If necessary, such information may be handed to the police in connection with a criminal investigation.

Any breach of the policy should be reported to the Clerk and Chair of the Council.

Rules for use of emails

Emails are the primary method to promote effective communication on matters relating to Council business, and therefore should be used for

that purpose only. If necessary, consider speaking to the recipient(s) first by telephone or in person, then follow up with an email.

Emails should not be used for spreading gossip, or for personal gain, or in breach of any of the Council's Codes of Conduct relating to bullying, intimidation, sexual or racial harassment.

Messages sent by email are to be written in accordance with the standards of any other form of written communication, and the content and language used in the message must be consistent with Council best practice. Messages should be clear and concise and directed to those individuals with a “need to know”, such as members of a Working Group. However, when responding to a large group of recipients, the “reply to all” facility should be used to ensure all parties receive the same information you wish to impart.

Confidential information should not be sent externally without the approval of the Chair or Clerk.

Erroneous email messages can give rise to legal action against the Council or individual Councillors. Claims for defamation, harassment, breach of confidentiality or contract could result.

It is therefore vital for email messages to be treated like any other form of correspondence and, where necessary, hard copies or copies saved to file should be retained. Messages are also disclosable in any legal action commenced against the Council or Councillors relevant to the issues set out in the email.

External emails received by a Councillor are to be forwarded to the Clerk – and the Chair if appropriate – who will in turn forward to other Councillors.

Misuse of emails in the following categories can lead to a breach of the code of conduct:

- a) Defamation of character
- b) Inappropriate, offensive or obscene content
- c) Untrue or malicious content
- d) Discriminatory on grounds of race, sex, age, marital status, disability, sexual orientation, religion or religious beliefs and philosophical beliefs
- e) Breach of Council confidential information

Version Control			
Version Number	Description of Changes	By Whom	Adopted at
1	Adopted policy	DL	FC 27/01/2020
2	Reviewed	PH	FC 20/09/2021
3	Reviewed – no changes	PH	FC 04/07/2022
4	Reviewed – no changes	PH	FC 15/05/2023