

Snodland Town Council

Communications and Publicity Protocol

(Relating to members of the public, other agencies, the media, Councillors, and staff)

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Aim:

The aim of the protocol is giving clear and unequivocal guidance upon the Town Council's processes for communications and media arrangements.

1. Correspondence/Information to the Town Council:

- 1.1 The point of contact for the Council is the CEO, and it is to the CEO that all correspondence for the Council should be addressed.
- 1.2 The CEO should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- 1.3 All official correspondence should be sent by the CEO in the name of the Council using Council letter headed paper or email using Council email format.
- 1.4 Where correspondence from the CEO to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (e.g. copy to XX).
- 1.5 Subject to 4.3. The CEO, other managers or staff should normally deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- 1.6 No individual councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Town Council, its committees, sub-committees or working parties.

2. Agenda Items and Reports for Council, committees, sub-committees and working parties:

- 2.1 Agenda items and reports should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information for Councillors to make an informed decision.
- 2.2 Where the CEO or a Councillor wishes Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information is to be circulated via the CEO. Items should only be discussed in confidential session if what is being discussed

contains commercially sensitive information or personal information.
Transparency must be the priority.

- 2.3 Items and reports for information or for noting should be kept to a minimum on all agendas.

3. Communications with the media, press and public:

The Town Council's communications need to be:

- Open – honest and transparent
- Consistent – in message and in delivery
- Responsive – proactive and timely
- Accurate – factual and correct
- Accessible – inclusive and representative
- Legal.

In addition, when dealing with the media, both officers and councillors need to have regard for:

- The Data Protection Act (1998)
- The Disability Discrimination Act (1995)
- The Freedom of Information Act (2000)
- The Human Rights Act (1998)
- The Race Relations Act (1976)
- The Sex Discrimination Act (1975)
- The Contempt of Court Act (1981) and contempt at common law
- The Defamation Act (1996) and defamation at common law

- 3.1 Any requests by the press and media for comments, other than factual information, should be referred to the Chairman or Vice Chairman.
- 3.2 Press and media requests for factual information will be responded to by the CEO.
- 3.3 The CEO and the Chairman will normally be the only spokespersons for the Council in responding to the press and media and making public statements on behalf of the Council. Recognising the need to maintain the dignity of office and strict political impartiality, the Chairman will only comment on Civic matters and items of general interest to the town rather than any formal business of the council.
- 3.4 The Chairman or other Councillor should liaise with the CEO on all forms of contact with the press and media unless it is a personal view.
- 3.5 When a news release is prepared, it should:
- Always contain an agreed quote from the relevant Councillor or Councillors.
 - Be cleared by the relevant committee Chairman

- Be issued by the CEO after obtaining agreement from the relevant Chairman about distribution arrangements and the spokesman for responding to follow up enquiries from the press.
- 3.6 Councillors who are asked for an official comment by the press or members of the public should ask that it be clearly reported that it is their personal view.
- 3.7 All Councillors may comment from a political viewpoint and when doing so should make it clear that their comments do not necessarily reflect the official view of Snodland Town Council and that it is a political comment.
- 3.8 If Councillors have a complaint or receive a complaint about service delivery or procedure from a member of the public, this should be presented to the CEO in written format, which may include an e-mail, to be dealt with under the complaints procedure, or via a Town Council agenda item. The person's name and address should be on record.
- 3.9 Press reports from the Council, its committees or working groups, should be from the CEO or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.

4. Councillor correspondence to other agencies:

- 4.1 All personal correspondence as a Town Councillor to other agencies should make it clear that the views are the expression of the personal opinions of the writer and not necessarily those of the Town Council.
- 4.2 If appropriate, a copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Town Council or one's role within it may be sent to the CEO together with a copy of any relevant inward correspondence. It should be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the CEO" so that the recipient is aware that the CEO has been advised.
- 4.3 Where a Councillor writes a letter at the request of a committee or Council, this should always be done in consultation with the CEO.

5. Communications with and by Council staff

5.1 Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (this would be three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or subcommittee with appropriate delegated powers from the Council and not an individual, regardless of whether or not they are the Chairman of the Council, Committee Chairman etc.).

5.2 Telephone calls and emails should be kept to a reasonable level, be appropriate to the work of the Town Council and:

- Instant detailed replies should not be expected unless genuine reasons for urgency are stated;

- Formal matters for information about official business to the other Councillors should normally be directed via the CEO;
- E-mails to other agencies about official business should be copied to the CEO;
- E-mails should be acknowledged when requested to do so.

5.3 Meetings with the CEO or other officers:

- Where possible an appointment should be made
- Councillors should be clear about the matters they wish to discuss and state the reason when making an appointment.

6. Responsibilities of officers

6.1 Officers should bear in mind that, whilst they are employed to serve the Council as a whole, their work involves dealing with individual councillors. To assist in that relationship:

- Telephone calls and meetings should be relevant to the Council's work;
- Enquiries from Councillors should be dealt with in a timely fashion and if an immediate response is not possible the enquiry should be acknowledged with an indication of when a full response will be made;
- Members should be kept informed as appropriate and definitely if there is any substantial change that affects the implementation of a decision they have made or if an issue is likely to have a detrimental effect or if the issue is likely to be of interest to the press and media;
- Committee reports should normally be included with the relevant agenda when it is dispatched. Reports marked "to follow" should be the exception and to help Councillors understand why a report is not included a reference to the reasons should be made in the agenda.

7. Ward Councillors

Generally, it will not be possible for media releases about individual Councillors to be made, except where they are working in their executive positions, or where they are chairing a particular committee.

Sections 39 to 42 of the publicity code state that: *"The functions of a local authority are discharged by the Council corporately. It is therefore inappropriate for public resources to be used to publicise individual Councillors. In the interests of public accountability, however, it may be appropriate to give publicity to the views or activities of individual members when they are representing the council as a whole: for example, when the chairman of a Council speaks or acts as the first citizen of the whole community, or when a chairman of a committee opens a new scheme or*

launches a policy approved by the Council or by his committee on the Council's behalf."

Ward Councillors may issue political media releases provided they do not imply that they are from the Council, that they do not make promises on behalf of the Council and they are not compiled using Council resources.

There should be no persuasion of the CEO or other officers to support them in their political objectives. Officers are only there to carry out the work of the Council and to implement the decisions it takes. They cannot support members in a political capacity or help to deliver political aims.

Ward Councillors must not give instructions to officers, other than through the formal decision-making process. Members must not instruct the CEO to issue media releases on their behalf, but can however, alert the CEO to events or developments that may require media coverage.

When speaking to the media there should be no editorial "exclusivity" and the Councillor should always state in what capacity they are speaking and what their role is in relation issue in question.

8. Partnerships with the Council

Where other organisations are contracted to provide services on behalf of the Council, or where the Council has agreed a working partnership, they will be expected to follow this protocol and liaise with the CEO prior to any media release.

9. Media handling during the election period

During the run up to election, it is vitally important that media handling be properly controlled to ensure that there can be no allegation of political bias in anything that the Council does. Although the laws relating to political neutrality always apply, in the election period, the laws relating to publicity become a lot stricter. This period is often referred to as "purdah".

Publicity is defined in section 6 of the Local Government Act 1986 as "any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public" The Act covers the obvious forms of publicity such as media releases, speeches and events, but applies equally to the less obvious, for example the use of political colours in advertising and even the colour of floral displays.

During the election period, the CEO will not issue any media release that could be seen as promoting the views of a particular political party, individual member of group of members. Media releases will not quote Councillors during this period and members will not be photographed.

10. Responding to letters in the printed media

Letters to the paper can be informative for the Town Council. However, while they can sometimes be unpleasant and on occasion, inaccurate, very often responding to them will only add fuel to the fire and keep a story going. For this reason, all non-political letters to newspapers should be first cleared through the CEO, who will consult with the Chairman of the Council. Councillors may of course respond in their political capacity.

If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's complaints procedure and therefore referred to the CEO as soon as practicable.

11. Social media

Social media is a generic term for the sharing opinions, gossip, discussions, stories, video, pictures and information electronically. The key feature of such systems is that they can be accessed in different ways – via computers, tablets and phones. Examples of popular social media tools include Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Google Plus. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

The Council will make use of social media to quickly disseminate information but carefully control their use to minimise the risks. The Town Council has a Facebook account and uses it to provide information on Council activities and re-tweeting official releases of public information from trusted sources such as KCC, TMBC, etc. The CEO is the designated Council owner of the Council's social media channels.

Councillors are at liberty to set up their 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 always present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made, and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language.

Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the council or its business, nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Snodland Town Council:

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities.
- Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your web site or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, once you post something it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site.

- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Council policies or personnel.
- Never give out personal details such as home address and telephone numbers.
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act.
- Use a disclaimer.
- When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Council.
- Avoid use of the Council e-mail address, logos or other Council identification.
- Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only.
- Where possible, you should include a standard disclaimer, such as:
"Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions".
- Know your obligations: you must comply with other Council policies when using social media.
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority, its employees and the town's residents. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
- Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts, and they should ensure they comply with the Council's Policy statement.
- As a Town Council, we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online influences this image.

12. Guidance for Councillors - social media and meetings

Councillors may wish to use social media to keep residents informed of the proceedings at Council and committee meetings. Below are some extra guidelines for Councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings.

Handheld devices and laptops are permitted for use during meetings to allow effective communication. The use of such devices is intended to improve communication during meetings - not to interrupt or distract anyone taking part. Ensure the volume on all electronic devices is turned to 'mute'.

Councillors' tweets/blogs during Council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting - tweeting/blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting.

Councillors have a responsibility to take Council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members. Snodland residents expect debate and to be informed about Council business, not witness petty arguments.