



**EVESHAM TOWN COUNCIL**

**COMMUNICATIONS AND  
MEDIA PROTOCOL**

## **AIM**

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

## **CORRESPONDENCE**

### **Town Clerk's Role**

The point of contact for the Town Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Council should be addressed.

The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting. All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letter headed paper or email using Council email format. Where correspondence from the Clerk 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).

No individual Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Council, a committee, sub-committee or working group.

### **Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Groups**

Agendas should be clear and concise and contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions may possibly be taken at the meeting.

Items for information should be kept to a minimum on any agenda.

Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information is to be circulated via the Clerk.

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.

### **Councillor correspondence to external parties**

As the Clerk should be sending most of the Council's correspondence, any correspondence from a Councillor to other bodies needs to make clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Council.

A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

Individual Councillor communications with constituents is a matter between that Councillor and the recipient(s). Any requests for letters to be processed shall only be acceded to by the Town Clerk following consultation with the Town Mayor, and with reference to the Council's resources.

Canvassing or any other promotional work by an individual councillor shall not involve the Town Clerk or any other employee.

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

### **Liaison between the Clerk and the Town Mayor**

Regular liaison meetings between the Town Clerk and the Town Mayor will take place.

### **Communications with Town Council employees**

Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so.

No individual Councillor, regardless of office, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee that are inconsistent or conflict with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.

E-mails:

- Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; any reasons for urgency should be stated;
- Information to other Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk
- E-mails from Councillors, when acting on behalf of the Council and not in their personal capacities, to external parties should be copied to the Clerk;
- Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

Meetings with the Clerk or other staff:

- Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
- Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer;
- Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate Council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas

## **MEDIA**

### **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 particular 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

### **Media enquiries**

The Clerk will clear all press reports or comments to the media in conjunction with the Town Mayor.

Press reports from the Council, its committees or working groups, should be from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.

Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it must be clearly reported as their personal view.

Unless a Councillor is absolutely certain that he/she is reporting the view of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.

### **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 Town Clerk 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. In particular, members must not instruct the Town Clerk to issue media releases on their behalf, but can however, alert the Clerk to particular 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.

### **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 Town Clerk prior to any media release.

### **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 apply at all times, 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 Town Clerk 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.

### **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 Town Clerk, who will consult with the Mayor. 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 Town Clerk as soon as practicable.

## **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, Linked In 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 in order to minimise the risks. The Town Council has a twitter, facebook and Instagram account and uses it to provide information on Council activities and re-tweeting official releases of

public information from trusted sources such as WCC, WDC, WMP etc. The Town Clerk 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 at all times 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 Evesham 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.

#### **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. Evesham residents expect debate and to be informed about council business, not witness petty arguments.