



ROYAL SUTTON COLDFIELD TOWN COUNCIL

COMMUNICATION POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

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

1.2 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 to deal with issues that may arise and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated.

2. KEY AIMS

2.1 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.

2.2 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.

2.3 Royal Sutton Coldfield 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, confidentiality issues or breaches of the Data Protection Act. Further details are included in the Social Media Policy adopted on

3. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, as amended by Part IV, Section 27 of the Local Government Act 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..

4. ATTENDANCE OF THE PUBLIC AT COUNCIL AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS

4.1 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."

4.2 If a member of the press or public interrupts the proceedings at any meeting, the Chair may, after warning and in accordance with Standing Order 2b, order that he/she be removed from the meeting room and/or that part of the room open to the public be cleared. The meeting may be adjourned for such a period as is necessary to restore order.

4.3 Any Council meetings may be audio or video recorded and photographs may be taken at a meeting. *Please refer to the "Audio recording, filming, photographing and reporting of Council and Committee Meetings Policy."*

4.4 The Council will consider the live streaming of its meetings as a means of encouraging public engagement.

5. ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

5.1 Upon reasonable request agendas, reports and minutes (less any confidential papers for use during any exclusion under paragraph 4.1 above) will be sent to the media free of charge

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

5.3 Council and Committee meetings may be audio recorded, filmed, photographed and reported, people intending to do so are requested to notify the Chair and/or the Clerk before the meeting. *Please refer to the "Audio recording, filming, photographing and reporting of Council and Committee Meetings Policy."*

6. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

6.1 Members, the Town Clerk and other officers should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

6.2 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.

6.3 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.

6.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for Members and the Town Clerk 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 sickness absences. In all these, and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Town Clerk before any response is made to the media.

6.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Leader (or Deputy Leader), Mayor (or Deputy Mayor) Town Clerk (or Deputy) are authorised to make contact with the media.

6.6 Other Councillors may talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions, comments and position given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council.

6.7 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.

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 and policy 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 in line with Council policy and position, however they must all be issued by the Town Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) and section four are adhered to, and that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

8. NEWSLETTERS

8.1 Newsletters can be an important way of communicating with the public. The Council will publish newsletters from time to time recognising that they need to be timely, attractive and readable. These may be delivered door to door or may be issued via the web site.

8.2 The Clerk will contact the Mayor, the Leader and Chair's of Committees inviting them to provide articles for these Newsletters. The Clerk will have editorial rights and will decide the final content of the Newsletter in line with Council policy and position as necessary and the date and means of distribution.

9. ON LINE PRESENCE

9.1 The Town Council's web site will be the first point of contact for most residents, visitors, businesses and local groups. It should be regularly updated and all information on the site should be accurate and as accessible as possible. The web site will contain links to other key partners.

9.2 The Council will consider advertising on its web site but will ensure that this does not imply any endorsement of the products and services mentioned in the advertising.

10. SOCIAL MEDIA

10.1 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 Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council could be represented.

10.2 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.

10.3 From time to time, the Council may have to respond to negative or inaccurate 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, inaccurate or inappropriate publicity.

10.4 Council social media must not be used for party political purposes or specific party political campaigning in accordance with the Local Government Act 1986 and the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Officers may promote councillors' social media accounts for Town Council specific issues as appropriate but not during any pre-election purdah period or periods of high sensitivity such as by-elections

10.5 Further guidance on the use of social media is set out in the Council's Social Media policy which was adopted on.....

11. URGENT SITUATIONS

11.1 In the case of an urgent letter, press release or comment being required in advance of a Council or Committee meeting, this may be issued by the Town Clerk, in consultation with the Leader, the Mayor, or relevant Committee Chair.

11.2 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:

- A)the Deputy Leader of the Council may act in the absence of the Leader;
- b) the Deputy Mayor of the Council may act in the absence of the Mayor;
- c) the Vice Chair of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chair;
- d) the Town Clerk may act in the absence of the Mayor or Deputy Mayor of the Council;

This policy was adopted by Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council at its meeting on and will be reviewed in November 2018.