



Communications and Media Protocol

TOTNES TOWN COUNCIL

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This protocol acts as a reference tool for any employee or Councillor who engages with the media or communicates with members of the public. It also includes guidance on personal use of social media where it could be deemed to have a negative impact on the Council's reputation.

This protocol applies to all Town Council employees and Councillors.

Introduction

Totnes Town Council receives enquiries from the media, constituents and wider members of the public every year.

The purpose of this protocol is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Clerk, Mayor, all employees and all Councillors and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest.

The aim of the protocol is to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's outside communications should be:

- Open and honest
- Proactive
- Responsive and timely

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The Council may use artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT to assist with drafting wording for press releases, newsletters, or social media posts. However, AI will not be used to generate imagery or to replace bespoke design work created by staff or professional designers. All AI-generated content will be reviewed and personalised by the member of staff and approved by a member of the management team before publication to ensure it aligns with Council values and policies.

Legal Issues

There are circumstances under which employers can be held legally responsible for content published by their employees. This may include action taken as part of their role for the organisation and material published on official organisation channels or somewhere that has been previously sanctioned by the Town Council. It is therefore important to make all employees aware of the potential legal issues with regards to communication.

It is important that employees are aware that communicating information about the Council cannot be isolated from their working life. For example any information published online can be accessed around the world within seconds and will be publicly available for all to see.

Employees and Councillors should take the following into consideration when using social media:

- Be aware of the Council guidelines for using social media, whether this is for personal use or as a part of their working role (See "SOCIAL MEDIA").
- Be familiar with the legal areas outlined below before writing or speaking about colleagues or sharing information about the Council.
- Ensure that verbal or written information does not disclose privileged or confidential information.

Libel and defamation

Defamation is the act of making a statement about a person or company that is considered to harm reputation, for example, by lowering others' estimation of the person or company, or by causing them to lose their rank or professional standing. If the defamatory statement is written down (in print or online) it is known as libel. If it is spoken, it is known as slander.

There are exceptions to this - posting a defamatory statement online or recording it on a podcast would both be examples of libel.

Other points to note

An organisation may be held responsible for something an employee has written or said if it is on behalf of the company or on a company-sanctioned space. Action can also be taken against anyone repeating libellous information from another source, so careful checks are needed before quoting statements from websites. This can also apply to linking to defamatory information.

You should consider whether a statement can be proved before writing or using it – in law, the onus is on the person making the statement to establish its truth.

Publicity

The media plays a huge role in informing residents about what the Council does and how it spends their money (at all tiers of Government). It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible will take a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews. This approach will help achieve the following objectives:

- Ensure that the Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and which listens
- Share and celebrate the Council's successes
- Give information about policies and services and about the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council's work
- Handle negative issues clearly and decisively

Publicity in Election Periods

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself all proactive publicity about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections.

During this period council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Councillors or groups of Councillors. This is to make sure that no individual or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this protocol.

Young People and Publicity

Guidelines should be followed if commissioning photographs of children (i.e. under 18 years of age) or if planning photography of children at events and using visual media for publicity purposes. Please refer to the Council's Safeguarding Policy for further information on this subject.

Tone and Style

All Council communications should follow a consistent tone and style that reflects professionalism, accessibility, and openness. A friendly, respectful, and informative tone is

encouraged, avoiding jargon and using plain language wherever possible. It is acknowledged that there is a different tone and style to be used for Visit Totnes posts which is more informal, but is grounded in the principles set out in this protocol.

Digital Accessibility

The Council is committed to ensuring that its digital communications are accessible to as wide an audience as possible. This includes using alt text for images, avoiding overly complex formatting, and ensuring compatibility with screen readers and assistive technologies where feasible.

The Media

The local press generally only covers stories relevant to people living and working in Totnes and the immediate surrounding areas. They include newspapers such as the Totnes Times (paid for) and community magazines such as Totnes Directory (paper) and Totnes Pulse (digital). Other local media include radio stations such as Soundart Radio, BBC Radio Devon and Heart all of which have specific target audiences.

Regional media includes newspapers like the Western Morning News and online news sites like Devon Live.

It is rare that Totnes Town Council would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level however the protocol remains pertinent in these cases.

Identifying Newsworthy Items and Handling Media Enquiries

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify worthy news items and this should be done as early as possible. These might include Mayoral engagements, the Christmas Markets or promoting successes of the Council. Ideas for news items should be sent to the Clerk and the Marketing & Communications Manager.

The Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the office. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the lead officer, Councillor or the Mayor to respond to the enquiry, in line with this protocol.

Council officers who are directly approached by a member of the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without gleaning the full facts and should confer with the Clerk before responding. However simple, factual queries will be dealt with appropriately by the office.

Councillors who are directly approached by a member of the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol.

The Council should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Councillors. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

News or Press Releases

News / press releases are one of the key techniques for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.

There are two types of press releases – Official Council Press Releases and Councillor Press Releases.

Official Council Press Releases: An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written by an officer and authorised by the Clerk. It is non-party political and will normally include a quote from the relevant Councillor(s). This is usually the Mayor or Committee Chair.

Official Council press releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and include an approved quotation from the appropriate Councillor. Matters of style, presentation, punctuation, grammar etc are the responsibility of the author.

Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official Council news/press releases will be placed on the Council's website within one working day of issue.

It should be borne in mind that a news or press release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and alternative ways of advertising it should be considered e.g. posters, mailings, websites, social networking etc.

Councillor Press Releases: Councillor press releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. This release may or may not be political and should not include the name of any officer, use the Council crest or the Council telephone number as a point of contact. It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases, especially those of a factual nature, to be provided to the Clerk. Councillors seeking advice can contact the Clerk or a member of the management team for advice.

Interviews

Any officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to the Clerk, the Mayor or the appropriate Committee Chair. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist.

Officers should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.

Media Activity Ahead of Meetings

The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All Council and Committee agendas are automatically published on the Totnes Town Council website.

Members of the media are welcome to attend and regularly do attend Council and Committee meetings. During meetings, Members should be mindful that any comments and

messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture, rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what can be a complex issue or report.

Media Crisis Response

In the event of a crisis or potentially damaging issue, a coordinated response will be led by the Town Clerk (or management team in their absence) in consultation with the Mayor and the relevant Committee Chair. Holding statements should be prepared promptly, and all media contact will be channelled through the Clerk unless otherwise agreed.

Non-Council Related Media Activity

Officers and Members of the Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-Council related organisations must not refer to their Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.

Managing Negative Issues

From time to time, the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Members and Officers must alert the Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest comes to light. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

Members and Officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

Should the media (a newspaper or broadcaster) publish/broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

The issue should be discussed with the Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. Also to decide who the most appropriate person is to take the necessary agreed action i.e. the Mayor, Committee Chairman or Lead Officer.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain. Each case must be judged individually. Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by holding hands up, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.

Newsletter

Currently, the Council takes a double page advert in the Totnes Directory (3 or 4 times a year). The Totnes Directory is a free leaflet delivered to all households in Totnes, which enables the Council to reach more local people who do not have access to the internet/social media. The advert aims to promote council policies, services, activities and initiatives. The content is created in house in consultation with any appropriate Councillors.

Ideas for articles are welcomed and these should be passed directly to the Clerk or a member of the management team.

Social Media

What is social media?

‘Social media’ is the term commonly given to websites, online tools and other Information Communication Technologies (ICT) which allow users to interact with each other in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. As the name implies, social media involves the building of communities or networks, encouraging participation and engagement. This protocol will also apply to any new or emerging technologies or systems which may develop in the future.

Current examples include (but are not limited to) podcasts, message boards, social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and SnapChat, and content sharing websites such as YouTube.

The aims of this protocol are:

- To ensure that social media used to communicate with the public, partners or other stakeholders by all Town Council staff in the performance of their duties is aligned to the view of the Town Council.
- To ensure that all Town Council social media sites are easily identifiable as originating from the Town Council and correctly apply the council’s logo and brand guidelines.
- To protect the reputation of the Town Council while embracing the possibilities of this communications channel.
- To ensure that any Council communication through social media meets legal requirements and is consistent with other communication activities.
- To prevent the unauthorised use of Town Council branding on employees’ or Councillors personal social media sites.

Applying this protocol: Council-run channels

- Town Council staff considering the use of, or wishing to use, social media as a channel for a project or campaign must first discuss and agree this with the Town Clerk and Mayor.
- Social media channels already featuring the Council’s logo or branding must comply with brand guidelines.
- The unauthorised use of the Town Council logo or branding on social media channels may result in action under the disciplinary procedure.
- Individual employees must not post any items on sites unless this has been reviewed by a member of the management team, colleague, or Councillor before publication to avoid unintentional errors or misrepresentation. A clear audit trail should be maintained for significant posts.

Applying this protocol: personal use of social media channels

If you already make reference to your employment/involvement in the Council on a personal digital site as defined above, or you intend to create such a site, you should inform the Town Clerk who will advise you of the appropriateness of doing this in line with the advice below:

- Do not engage in activities on the internet that might bring the Council into disrepute.
- Do not use the Council logo on personal web pages.
- Do not reveal information which is confidential to the Council - consult the Town Clerk if you are unsure.
- Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or staff without their permission.
- Under no circumstance should offensive comments be made about the Council, Councillors, or colleagues on the Internet. This may amount to cyber-bullying or defamation and could be deemed a disciplinary offence.

Social media campaigns

Employees or Councillors who are considering social media campaigns should firstly consult the Town Clerk for guidance. Coordinating efforts and using the Town Council corporate account can ensure that the project has a clear purpose, fits into the existing Town Council views and is suitable for the target audience they wish to reach.

Social Media Tips and Advice

Social Media or Social Networking is both a broadcast medium and a receiving medium.

From the business point of view:

- It can be used as a receiving medium to gather opinions about the Council which have appeared on the social media networks. As such it is an invaluable tool to add to our understanding of what people think about us.
- It is possible to broadcast using the same social media networks to engage with and talk to those who are interested enough to have a view. As such it is a useful and powerful tool.

From a personal point of view:

- Individuals employed by the Council are entitled to use whatever system they like outside of their working time and working persona, to engage in the social aspects of the media – both broadcasting and receiving.
- However great care should be taken to ensure the private/work line is not crossed.
- It is good practice to follow the stricture of never mentioning work, your opinions of your colleagues or processes and projects on your own private Social Media Networks. This aspect is covered in 'LEGAL ISSUES'.

Freedom of Information and Data Protection

Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (email or written), normally that correspondence would have to be disclosed, unless it was exempt. The fact that the disclosure of the correspondence may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.

In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 1998 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was

supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

Refer to the Information Policy, Chapter 14 of the Council Constitution for further information and guidelines in this respect.

Internet Acceptable Use Policy

Internet use covers all websites (including the Totnes Town Council website), networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc, forums and blogs which may be used by both Officers and Councillors.

If the above are used in an official capacity or on Council related business, the guidance in this protocol must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Under the consideration of Acceptable Use, when acting in the capacity of Totnes Town Council, websites should not:

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or used for campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner
- If social media is used in an unofficial capacity, Members and Officers should restrain from making remarks that could be construed as bringing the Council into disrepute. Please see "SOCIAL MEDIA".

APPENDIX 1 – ADMINISTRATION OF INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK

Totnes Town Council encourages open and two-way conversation with constituents, partner agencies, members of the many communities in which it participates and the general public.

Such dialogue is crucial in our effort to engage with citizens and to support our values of openness, fairness, flexibility and teamwork.

The council expects employees and Councillors to exercise personal responsibility whenever you participate in social media. This includes not breaching the trust of those with whom you are engaging.

General operating guidelines:

1. Do not publish any information which is not already in the public arena.
2. Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
3. Ask a colleague or Councillors to check wording for accuracy.
4. Be mindful that what you publish may be public for a long time.
5. Respect copyright laws.
6. Do not publish or report on conversations that are meant to be private or internal to Totnes Town Council without permission. Do not cite or reference customers, partners or suppliers without their approval. When you do make a reference, link back to the source where possible.
7. Respect your audience. Do not publish anything that would not be acceptable in the workplace. You should also show proper consideration for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory, such as politics and religion.
8. Remember that you are an ambassador for the council and be cordial at all times.
9. Do not correct other contributors' spelling or grammar.
10. If a contributor makes a comment that is defamatory or likely to cause extreme offense, edit or remove it where possible. If this is not possible, report it to the operator of the website. Contact the user to explain why you took this action, and if appropriate ask them to post the comment again without the offensive content.
11. All feedback to the council through social networking sites should be fed back to the Town Clerk, and as appropriate, Full Council. Feedback that requires a response must be acknowledged promptly. Where action is required, bear in mind that excessive delay will have a negative impact on the council's reputation.
12. Passwords for Town Council social media sites must not be shared with any unauthorised persons and these must be changed when a member of staff leaves office.

Authorisation:

Types of tweets and posts authorised employees can send out as part of their daily responsibilities from the official Totnes Town Council Facebook/Instagram account:

- Informing the community about upcoming public meetings such as Full Council.
- Sending out last minute/next month availability for the Civic Hall.

- Sending out updates on improvements/changes such as the availability calendars on the website.
- Posting photos after successful events or before to promote tourist attractions such as the market.
- Giving out relevant advice in situations such as adverse weather
- Sending updates on the progress of long-term traffic disruptions (such as the gas works in January)
- Sending out notices of unavoidable office closures for the Guildhall and TIC
- Promoting events in the area such as the Christmas Market.
- Posting photos of improvements around the town, such as cleaned up bus shelters, repainted public areas and the Christmas lights.

Examples:

- *Drive carefully tomorrow morning as heavy rain is predicted for rush hour. For updates follow@metofficeSWEng*
- *Please bring flooding photos/video to Totnes flood drop in sessions at the Civic Hall on 10th January from 7pm till 10pm*
- *The roadworks are progressing well. Please remember we are open for business! Further details can be found on www.totnestowncouncil.gov.uk*
- *Special offer - last minute availability in the Civic Hall on Saturday 20th February, 10% discount on list price. Please contact us for info.*
- *Great progress being made in removal of graffiti in the town – see the team hard at work here (link to be added)*
- *Totnes Traders are hard at work planning the Christmas Markets. If you are interested in having a stall please contact*
- *Richard Branson will be opening the new ??? on Saturday at 3pm. Please contact (link to be added) for further information.*
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Types of posts that require permission of the Town Clerk and Mayor (or 2 Councillors as a minimum) in order to be sent from the official Totnes Town Council twitter account:

- Responding to complaints or negative reports or entering into debate.
- Supporting other local organizations and businesses to support a cause.
- Responding to contentious queries and current media stories regarding the local area or the Town Council.

Examples:

- *The Boundary Commission is asking how many Councillors should represent SHDC in future. Click here to give your views.....*
- *Further to the article in the Totnes Times on Monday the mayor announces ????. Press release in full at www.totnestowncouncil.gov.uk*
- *Totnes Town Council supports the call for a review of Council Tax benefit funding. Click here for further information.*