



## **COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA POLICY (INCLUDING SOCIAL MEDIA)**

**Name of governing body:** Folkestone Town Council

**Date on which this policy was approved by governing body:** 26<sup>th</sup> April 2018

Finance & General Purposes – Minute 1206

**Date at which this policy is due for review:** April 2019

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this policy is to guide both Councillors and Officers of the Council on external communications, contact with the media and use of social media.

This policy does not seek to be either prescriptive or comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with external communications, media and social media.

Above everything else, a Councillor must observe Folkestone Town Council's Code of Conduct whenever he/she conducts the business of the authority, conducts the business of the office to which he/she has been elected or acts as a representative of the authority.

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### **TOWN CLERK AND MEMBERS OF STAFF**

The Town Clerk as the Proper Officer of the Council is authorised to receive all communications from the Press and Media and to issue Press Statements on behalf of the Council and Museum.

In the absence of the Town Clerk, media communications will be handled by the Corporate & Civic Services Officer. In the absence of both of these officers enquiries will be referred to the Mayor who will act as the spokesperson for the purposes of this element of the policy.

All communications made by the Town Clerk will relate to the stated business and day to day management of the activities or adopted policy of the Council.

The Town Clerk is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council.

Where such questions are put to the Town Clerk the enquirer will be referred to the Mayor or a Committee Chairman as considered appropriate.

No other member of staff, unless authorised by the Town Clerk, is permitted to make any statement to the media or any other public statement, on any matter affecting the Council or its business. Members of staff are governed by strict rules on impartiality and publicity and are not allowed to enter into any form of communication that supports or promotes, or may be interpreted as supporting or promoting, the political views of any councillor or group of councillors.

In support of the above no member of staff should ever, either during the course of their employment or in their private life:

- Publicise confidential information gained in the course of their employment.
- Maliciously undermine the council and its decisions by adverse or negative comments.
- Take personal issues concerning their employment to the media.
- Bring the council into disrepute by the extremity of their views.

## **MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**

A Councillor must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on Council or Committee agendas or at any other private briefing.

A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Folkestone Town Council.

When communicating to the Press and Media, Members should make clear the capacity, in which they are providing the information.

For example:

- as the Town Mayor
- as Chairman of a Committee
- as a Political Group Leader or spokesperson for a political party
- as an individual (i.e. letter to press for publication)

Never use the prefix "Councillor" when communicating with the press as an individual. This implies you are stating Council policy. A copy of any communications sent to the Press and Media by a Member, as representing the Council, must be forwarded to the Town Clerk.

Take particular care if the press or media approach you for comment on a controversial subject, and do not be led into stating something you did not really mean to say. If unsure about any particular policy, simply state "no comment" and ask the press to contact the Town Clerk.

Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be extra careful about expressing individual views to the press or media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business.

Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made and whilst it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in an open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the press.

A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer at meetings held in public or before the press.

## **COMMUNICATING WITH THE PRESS**

When communicating with the Press verbally, members and officers should be aware of the following:

- Be calm, informed and certain of all your facts

- Ensure that when making comments on behalf of the Town Council that you are aware what Council Policy is and that your comments reflect that policy.
- Ensure that your comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or officers into disrepute and ensure that comments are neither libellous nor slanderous.

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## **ISSUES TO BE AWARE OF**

Councillors and members of staff not used to communicating with the press may be surprised when they see that statements made in all innocence look very different in print than they did when they were spoken. It is advantageous to write out a statement or position beforehand.

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## **MEETINGS OF COUNCIL AND COMMITTEES**

Copies of Agendas, Minutes and Reports sent to Members for meetings of the Council or its Committees will be e-mailed to the Press and Media and made available online. Facilities will be provided at meetings for the Press to take notes of the proceedings.

As provided in the Council's Standing Orders both the Press and Public may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion. Note: The Town Council is governed by the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act, 1960.

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## **PRESS RELEASES**

All press releases made on behalf of the Town Council and Folkestone Museum must be prepared or approved by the Town Clerk.

The Town Clerk, in consultation with the Town Mayor, is also authorised to publish press releases on any matters where there is insufficient time for a council meeting.

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## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media is the term used for online tools, websites and interactive media that enable users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This policy and guidelines cover social media issues over the internet and by email, smart phones, social networking sites, blogging, and tweeting that are directly work related or through personal use that can be directly or indirectly linked to work.

For the purposes of this policy, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums, wikis and any sites which may emerge after the creation of this policy where Folkestone Town Council or Folkestone Museum could be represented via employee participation.

Folkestone Town Council acknowledges social media as a useful tool however, clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media sites to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that their use does not expose the council to security risks, reputational damage or breach the General Data Protection Regulations.

### ***Risks***

The following risks have been identified with social media use (this is not an exhaustive list):

Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites.

Disclosure of confidential information.

Damage to the council's reputation.

Social engineering attacks (also known as 'phishing').

Bullying or witch-hunting (also known as 'trolling')

Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.

Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.

### ***Responsibilities of Members of Staff***

Members of staff, who in the course of their employment place content on behalf of Folkestone Town Council and Folkestone Museum, are personally responsible for any content published on any form of social media.

Publishing or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may incur libel and disciplinary action. The council could also potentially be liable for the actions of our employees in these circumstances.

Social media sites are in the public domain and members of staff 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. Misuse or self-promotion via social media may result in disciplinary action.

Copyright laws still apply online. Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (e.g. extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. If officers are unsure about publishing anything they must seek permission from the copyright holder in advance.

It's your own personal choice whether or not you choose to participate in any kind of social media activity in your own time – the views and opinions that you express are your own. However, as a council officer you should be aware that any information which you post about Folkestone Town Council or Folkestone Museum cannot be kept entirely separate from your working life.

### ***Responsibilities of councillors***

You are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media. Publishing or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may incur a libel action.

Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important to ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed.

Make use of stringent privacy settings if you don't want your social media to be accessed by the press or public. Read the terms of service of any social media site accessed and make sure you understand their confidentiality/privacy settings.

The council reserves the right to request the removal of any content that is deemed to be in breach of the Code of conduct for members.

## **GENERAL**

This document has been prepared as a guidance note for members of staff and elected members. It represents the policy of the Council in respect of its relationships with the Press and Media.

The policy has been prepared to ensure consistency in the Council's dealing with the Press and Media and details who is authorised to speak on behalf of the Council. It has been drafted to ensure that the views and policy of the Council are presented accurately.

In providing information to the Press and Media, members of Council and members of staff representing the Council will abide by the "Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity" published by the Department for Communities & Local Government.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1878324.pdf>

The overriding principle of this policy is that all elements of the Press and Media will be treated equally.