



ALTON TOWN COUNCIL COMMUNICATION & SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

INTRODUCTION

Alton Town Council's Communication & Social Media Policy is based upon three key principles which enable the council to work more effectively. These are:

Communication – directly communicate important and timely messages, news and information, promote events and improve awareness of services by providing direct digital access to them.

Engagement – seek opinions, share conversations and better engage with residents. We can help to improve residents' knowledge and correct misconceptions.

Collaboration – find more efficient ways of working together and sharing information which can change or enhance the perception of the council and that of specific service areas or projects

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for interacting with the media and with the public, primarily through social media channels but also covering e-mail correspondence and other forms of written communications.

1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with both the public and the media. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk with media channels and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

2 KEYS AIMS

2.1 The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications with the public and the media. The media – press, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them 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 The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to officers and members and to background information to assist them in this role. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

3 THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy:-

- “Any publicity describing the Council’s policies and aims [and the provision of services] should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both.”

- “Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council... should be handled with particular care. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although councils should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments.”

- “Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.”

- “... local authorities... should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”

3.2 In particular, officers and members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the public and the media.

3.3 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the public or media channels. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and take appropriate action.

3.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for officers and members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address, private e-mail address and telephone numbers (although Member contact details are in the public domain), annual leave, disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Town Clerk before any response is made to the public or the media.

3.5 It is illegal to use graphics or photographs without permission. Ensure that anyone giving permission to use an image is the original copyright owner and check the licensing agreement of photographs in any existing archives before use. Do not take or use any photographs of children who appear to be under the age of 18 without permission from a parent or guardian. Permission is non-transferable from a third party, such as a school.

4.0 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC

4.1 When responding to approaches from the media and the public, the Town Clerk is usually the main contact with permission to respond on behalf of the Council. The Town Mayor, Leader of the Council and the Chairs of Committees, by the nature of their position are also authorised contacts with the media and public in consultation with the Town Clerk.

4.2 Statements made either electronically, verbally or in printed matter by the Town Mayor, Leader of the Council or the Chairs of Committees should always reflect the Council’s opinion and set policies.

4.3 If other councillors are contacted directly by the media or the public for comment, they should liaise with the Town Clerk before responding to the request.

4.4 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. 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. However, such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks.

4.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Town Mayor-or the Town Clerk. Members are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the Local Press as a means of expressing their personal views.

4.6 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

5 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

5.1 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available in the Chamber or access given to meetings via electronic means where it is made available.

5.2 Filming or recording of Council or Committee proceedings by the media is permitted in accordance with Standing Orders and the Council Protocol on the Recording of Meetings.

6 ELECTIONS

6.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Members and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that Council resources should not be used on publicising individual members unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the Council. These extracts from the Code illustrate the main points:-

- Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the council (for example, Town Mayor or Chairs of a committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and ... personalisation of issues or personal images making should be avoided."
- "Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor which are relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward their justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals."
- "The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.

6.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the Council. In this situation, members holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

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 on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of all officers and members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

7.2 All press releases are to be factual, non-political, not written to cause offence and must be in accordance with Council policy.

7.3 All press releases are to be issued by the Town Clerk (but may be drafted by other officers, subject to approval) in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored, having consulted with the Mayor, Leader of the Council or Chairs of the relevant committee on the proposed wording as appropriate.

8 SOCIAL MEDIA

8.1 The definition of social media continues to evolve as platforms and technologies develop. On the whole, it refers to any web-based practices which can be used to share content. This policy applies to the use of all social media by any Councillors and employees of Alton Town Council.

8.2 It is a key communications tool for the Town Council and highlights a commitment to openness and transparency.

8.3 Anything written on an Alton Town Council social media channel reflects on the organisation, but given the relaxed style of social media, it is important not to appear overly formal.

8.4 The Town Clerk and the Community and Events Officers are designated as the administrators of the Town Council's Social Media channels namely Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and You Tube, as well as any other social media platforms in place at the time and all postings should be directed through these officers. As a general rule any postings should only reflect information of content which it would be acceptable to publish to the general public in other council communications.

8.5 The Town Council is under no obligation to moderate posts or comments made by the public on its social media channels. However, the council would not want to be seen to be endorsing comments which are defamatory, false or misleading; insulting, threatening or abusive; obscene or of a sexual nature; offensive, racist, sexist, homophobic or discriminatory against religions or other groups; promoting illegal activity; or intended to deceive. Such posts to Alton Town Council Social Media pages will be removed.

8.6 Occasional negative posts cannot be avoided, but how they are dealt with has implications for the Town Council's reputation. They should not be ignored, although sometimes no answer is required if it is a rhetorical question, a repetition of an earlier posting, or a post designed to provoke.

8.7 As posts are public it is better to answer them in public, although occasionally it may help to take them onto a private channel.

8.8 While the private accounts of authority employees and Councillors are their own business, it is still possible for the content posted on them to affect their professional standing and/or that of the Council. To mitigate this risk Members/ Officers may not wish include any reference to, or post comments about, the council, job roles, colleagues, or partner organisations. If, however references to your employment or connection with the council are made on a personal social media profile, please ensure the following actions:

- Declare somewhere on your page or biography that the views expressed are yours alone
- Do not bring the authority into disrepute
- Do not reveal any potentially confidential or sensitive information about the authority that you may have come across in your work or role for the Council.
- Do not use any council-owned images or logos
- Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or staff.
- Do not make offensive comments about the authority, members, officers, colleagues or members of the public as this is a disciplinary offence

- 8.9 Members are strongly advised to have separate social media accounts to be used in their capacity as Councillors so as to avoid any confusion over whether comments are made in a personal or professional capacity.

APPENDIX A - UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES WHEN USING SOCIAL MEDIA.

1. Be human

Be approachable in your language and tone.

2. Be engaging

Respond to questions and talk back when you can move the conversation on or help.

3. Be professional

Remember that you are representing your authority.

4. Share and say where it came from

You can share what others have posted but it is polite to acknowledge and attribute where this has come from.

5. You can't control, only contribute

You cannot stop conversation amongst residents. You can only contribute to it.

6. Content is king

By creating sharable and engaging content you can contribute to the conversation and be heard.

7. Be authentic

Don't try and pretend to be something you are not. Ghosted accounts are not authentic.

8. Be trusting

We cannot monitor every conversation, letter, phone call or email. Trust your staff and you will gain far more than you will lose.

9. Be strategic

Plan ahead – who do you want to engage with, why and how? What do you want to achieve?

APPENDIX B - Social media policy - Do's and don'ts template from the Local Government Association.

This policy has been developed following a survey of over 120 local government councillors and officers up and down the country. It is intended to open the door to social media use in your local authority rather than block it.

If you stick to this one simple rule you won't go too far wrong: **Don't post any message on social media that you wouldn't happily say in a public meeting.**

LGA Policy template: Do's and don'ts at a glance

Do

- talk to residents, staff and others. And do answer their questions (quickly and honestly)
- trust your teams and staff to use social media
- be responsible at all times
- be respectful at all times, too

- innovate – different approaches work for different people
- have a personality – corporate speak or just issuing press releases won't work well on social media
- share other people's helpful content and links
- credit other people's work, ideas and links
- listen (social media is designed to be a two-way channel, just like any good conversation)
- ask your own questions. Seek feedback from your residents (but make sure you share the results with them)
- have a rota where appropriate – share the load and you'll get more from your accounts
- adhere to your existing HR policies – you don't need a separate HR policy especially for social media
- talk to your communications team – they are there to help you
- and more than anything, do use social media in the spirit in which it was intended – to engage, openly and honestly.

Don't

- broadcast or talk at people. Your residents will soon spot broadcasts and respond accordingly
- block social media – social media is not a risk, blocking its use is a risk
- try to cover up mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run
- build accounts and just hope people will come – sometimes it is best to go to the places where your audiences are already having conversations
- assume that social media will look after itself – you will need to invest time, enthusiasm and energy to make it work. And don't leave your accounts unattended for long spells
- post content which will embarrass your council or yourself
- ignore legal advice, it's there to help you
- think that a disclaimer in your bio will save you from potential legal action, it won't
- expect your staff to make do with old technology which can be a barrier to effective working
- share your passwords with anyone other than your communications leads
- forget that social media is 24/7 – just because you leave at 5.00 pm doesn't mean the world stops or that residents won't be active. If your account is only staffed 9-5 then you should say so on your profile.