



Seaton Town Council Constitution

Chapter 15 Communications & Media Policy

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Seaton Town Council receives enquiries from the media, constituents and wider members of the public every year.
- 1.2 Good communication helps an organisation function effectively. The aim of the policy 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
 - Clear, easily understood and written in Plain English
- 1.3 The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Lead Officer, Mayor, all employees and all Councillors and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest.
- 1.4 This policy acts as a reference tool for any employee or Councillor who engages with the media or communicates with members of the public. It includes guidance on:
 - Internal Communication
 - External Communication
 - Publicity
 - Media
 - Social Media
- 1.5 This policy applies to all Town Council employees, Councillors, contractors & volunteers.

2.0 Internal communication

- 2.1 Internal communication ensures that officer have the right information to do their job properly, have sufficient opportunities to communicate their views and can help them feel involved and valued by their employer.
- 2.2 Well informed and engaged staff are more likely to provide excellent customer service in terms of their attitude and knowledge. All staff should operate according to the Staff Handbook.
- 2.3 Councillors need to be well informed about the council, particularly regarding issues affecting their constituents. Likewise, Councillors are encouraged to keep the Lead Officer informed of local projects activities and initiatives that they are involved in. All Councillors should operate according to the Member Code of Conduct.
- 2.4 To develop and maintain effective two-way communication between officers and Councillors (to encourage trust, loyalty, understanding and a 'one council' approach to our work), we will:

- share information widely, but targeting it to avoid 'information overload'
- let Councillors and officers know about issues and developments that affect them or the council as soon as possible and listen to their responses
- consulting with Councillors and officer, through formal and informal methods, on important issues that affect them
- encourage Councillors and officers to take individual and collective responsibility for improving communication.

3.0 External communication

3.1 External communication ensures that all stakeholders (including residents, businesses, visitors, voluntary and community groups and other partner organisations) have the right information about council services and sufficient opportunities to communicate their views to the council.

3.2 We will do this by:

- sharing information widely, but targeting it to avoid 'information overload'
- using a variety of different communication methods (such as the website, social media, press releases and public consultation) and formats to reach different stakeholders
- seeking the views of the public and other stakeholders on important issues that affect them.

3.3 External communication should:

- encourage understanding and contribute to transparency and openness
- keep stakeholders well informed about the future direction of the council and about issues that affect them
- give the public and other stakeholders opportunities to express opinions, contribute to decision making and voice complaints
- demonstrate our commitment to adequate, reliable, trustworthy and timely communication
- be 'joined up' and present the organisation as 'one council'.

4.0 Publicity

4.1 The media play 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.

4.2 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

- 4.3 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 from the Council about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections.
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this Policy.

5.0 The Media

- 5.1 The local press generally only covers stories relevant to people living and working in Seaton and the immediate surrounding areas for example the Midweek Herald and Devon Live (formerly the Express and Echo). Other local media include radio stations such as BBC Devon, Heart FM, and Radio Exe all of which have specific target audiences.
- 5.2 Regional media includes newspapers like the Express and Echo and Western Morning News.
- 5.3 It is rare that Seaton Town Council would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level however, this policy remains pertinent in these cases.

6.0 Identifying Newsworthy Items and Handling Media Enquiries

- 6.1 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, local events or promoting successes of the Council. Ideas for news items should be sent to the Lead Officer and these will be shared with the Council's Marketing Contractor, One Voice Media and PR Ltd.
- 6.2 The Lead Officer will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the office. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the Town Clerk, Chairman (the Deputy Chairman will be contacted in the Chairman's absence) or Committee Chairman to respond to the enquiry, in line with this Policy.
- 6.3 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 Lead Officer before responding. However simple, factual queries will be dealt with appropriately by the office.
- 6.4 Councillors who are directly approached by a member of the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this Policy. However,

they should make the Lead Officer aware of the media request and the details that they have given the media.

- 6.5 The Council should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual officers and Councillors. Leaking of confidential information, exempt agenda items and minutes to the media is viewed very seriously by the Council. The Freedom of Information Act does allow certain information to be available to any person who requests such information including the media, unless the council has justifiable reasons for not releasing the information. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

7.0 Press Releases

- 7.1 Press releases are designed to inform and raise awareness about Council services and activities, highlight achievements, explain reasons for particular policies and priorities and improve local accountability and transparency. They need to catch the attention of the media and ensure good positive coverage about the Council.

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

Official Council Press Releases:

- 7.3 An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written by either the Lead Officer or an officer and authorised by the Lead Officer. It is non-party political and will normally include a quote from the relevant Councillor(s). This is usually the Mayor or Committee Chair.
- 7.4 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.
- 7.5 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.
- 7.6 All official Council news/press releases will be placed on the Council's website within three working days of issue.
- 7.7 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.
- 7.8 At the end of each press release relevant contact details will be provided.

- 7.9 Wherever possible, press releases will be accompanied by either the offer of a photo opportunity which is likely to be of interest to the media or a relevant photograph.

Councillor Press Releases:

- 7.10 Councillors can issue personal press releases, and these should be signed in a personal capacity without the word Councillor attached to the name. Such press releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. This release may or may not be political and must not include the name of any officer, use the Council logo 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 Lead Officer. Councillors seeking advice can contact the Lead Officer.

8.0 Interviews

- 8.1 Any officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to the Lead Officer, 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.
- 8.2 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.

9.0 Media Activity Ahead of Meetings

- 9.1 The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All Council and Committee agendas are automatically published on the Seaton Town Council website at least three clear days before the meeting.
- 9.2 Members of the media are welcome to attend and regularly do attend Council and Committee meetings. During meetings Councillors 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.

10.0 Non-Council Related Media Activity

- 10.1 Officers and Councillors 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.

11.0 Managing Negative Issues

- 11.1 From time to time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity and the reputational risk to the Council.
- 11.2 Councillors and Officers must alert the Lead Officer 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.
- 11.3 Councillors 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.

12.0 Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

- 12.1 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.
- 12.2 The issue should be discussed with the Lead Officer 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.
- 12.3 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.
- 12.4 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.

13.0 Social Media

- 13.1 'Social media' is the term commonly given to web-based tools 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.
- 13.2 Current examples include, blogs, vlogs, message boards, social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, Google+), and content sharing websites (such as Instagram, Snapchat, Flickr and YouTube). This is not an exhaustive list.
- 13.3 This Policy will also apply to any new or emerging technologies or systems which may develop in the future.

13.4 It is important to remember that you are responsible for what you post on social media. Users need to be acutely aware that anything published on an official site, published on behalf of the Council, reflects upon the Council and its reputation. Councillors and Officers using social media must follow the Council's social media guidelines.

13.5 The aims of this Policy are:

- To ensure that social media used to communicate with the public, partners or other stakeholders by all Town Council officers in the performance of their duties are 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 channel or communication.
- 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.

13.6 Applying this Policy: Council-run social media accounts

- Town Council officers and Councillors 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 Lead Officer 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.
- The Lead Officer and/or the Assistant to the Lead Officer & Mayor will be responsible for maintaining the Council's profile on the relevant social media sites.
- Officers and Councillors may assist the Lead Officer and/or the Assistant to the Lead Officer & Mayor at the Lead Officer's discretion.
- Care must be taken by multiple account users when posting to social media sites, to ensure activity is being assigned to the correct account.
- It is recommended that posts to social media are reviewed by a colleague or Councillor before publication to avoid unintentional errors being posted.
- Social media will be used to enable the Council to:
 - Engage with individuals and communities
 - Promote Council services
 - Announce the date of forthcoming meetings
 - Provide information on local events, council initiatives and achievements
 - Advise on maintenance work due to be carried out
 - Bring relevant local information to the attention of the community

13.7 Applying this Policy: personal use of social media

If you already make reference to your employment/involvement in the Council on a personal internet site as defined above, or you intend to create such a

site, you should inform the Lead Officer 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 Lead Officer if you are unsure.
- Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or officers 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.

13.8 Social media campaigns

Employees or Councillors who are considering social media campaigns should firstly consult the Lead Officer for guidance. Coordinating efforts and using a 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.

13.9 Social Media Tips and Advice

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

13.10 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. As such this is a benign and useful tool.
- 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.

13.11 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*' below.

14.0 Freedom of Information and Data Protection

14.1 Councillors 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.

- 14.2 In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The General Data Protection Regulations prevent the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Councillors should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

15.0 Internet Acceptable Use Policy

- 15.1 Internet use covers all websites (including the Seaton Town Council website), networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Bebo etc, forums and blogs which may be used by both Officers and Councillors.
- 15.2 If the above are used in an official capacity or on Council related business, the guidance in this Policy must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.
- 15.3 Under the consideration of Acceptable Use, when acting in the capacity of Seaton 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
- 15.4 If social media is used in an unofficial capacity, Councillors and Officers should restrain from making remarks that could be construed as bringing the Council into disrepute. Please see section 13 on Social Media.

16.0 Legal Issues

- 16.1 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.
- 16.2 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.

- 16.3 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 section 13 on 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.

17.0 Libel and defamation

- 17.1 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.

18.0 Other points to note

- 18.1 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 libelous 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.

19.0 Young People and Publicity

- 19.1 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 you must get consent from the child's parents or school. If you need further guidance please speak to the Lead Officer.

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