



Frodsham
TOWN COUNCIL

Communications and Media Policy (including social media)

Date approved:

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INTRODUCTION

Frodsham Town Council (“the Council”) is committed to the provision of accurate information about its function, governance, decisions and activities. Where this information is not available via the Council’s publication scheme, please contact the Town Clerk.

The Council shall, where possible communicate with those whose work involves gathering material for publication in any form, including use of the internet (“the media” including researchers, journalists, reporters, photographers, editors of newspapers and magazines).

This policy explains how the Council, its councillors and staff will work with the media to meet the above objectives in accordance with the legal requirements and restrictions that apply.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AND RESTRICTIONS

This policy is subject to the Council’s statutory obligations set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Openness of Local Government Bodies regulations 2014 together with the Council’s standing orders and Financial Regulations. The Council’s Financial Regulations and relevant standing orders referenced in this policy are available via the Council’s website or publication scheme.

The Council, its councillors and staff cannot disclose confidential information or information where disclosure of information is prohibited by law. The Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Council’s standing orders, under contract or by common law. Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the code of conduct adopted by the Council, a copy of which is available via the Council’s website or publication scheme.

MEETINGS

Meetings of the Council and its committees are open to the public unless the meeting resolves to exclude them because their presence at the meeting is prejudicial to the public interest due to the confidential nature of the business or other special reason(s) stated in the resolution. In accordance with the Council’s standing orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting of the Council and its committees, if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.

Where a meeting of the Council and its committees include an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Council’s Standing Orders. Protocol for Public Participation in Council Meetings and Virtual Meeting Policy.

Public Participation Session with respect to items on the Agenda and other matters that are of mutual interest.

The agenda will indicate when the public participation takes place

Public participation will be for a period not exceeding 15 minutes (reference Standing Order 3f) unless directed by the Chairman of the meeting

All queries or questions should be received by the Clerk at least 24 hours before the meeting takes place. Anything received after that time for inclusion in the meeting will be at the decision of the Chairman.

The Chairman of the meeting will direct whether or not the item may be included.

Members of the public should be aware that any issues raised may not be commented on or debated by the Town Council during the meeting. The Chairman will indicate if the issue raised will be added to a future agenda or if it will be dealt with by the Clerk.

The Council reserves the right to decline any item deemed inappropriate for inclusion in the meeting. The Chairman of the meeting will direct whether or not the item may be included. The agenda will indicate when the public participation will take place. Questions and comments should address the business on the agenda. Otherwise, in most cases, the matter will be carried forward, without discussion, to the next meeting.

Members of the public can remain to observe the remainder of the meeting with the exception of any closed items.

The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a meeting of the Council and its committees (which includes e.g. using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV/radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums, or social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) which enable a person not at the meeting to see, hear or be given commentary about the meeting is permitted unless: (i) the meeting has resolved to hold all or part of the meeting without the public present or; (ii) such activities disrupt the proceedings or; (iii) paragraphs 9 and 10 below apply.

As a courtesy to the public, and to assist anyone planning to film etc., the Clerk of the Council should be contacted in advance of the meeting to enable the Clerk to discuss and assist with any specific requirements.

There is no actual requirement to notify the Council in advance, but it should be noted that the Chairman of the meeting will have absolute discretion to terminate or suspend any of these activities if, in their opinion, continuing to do so would prejudice proceedings at the meeting.

It is expected that those who are recording proceedings will not edit the film/recordings/photographs in a way that could lead to misinterpretation of the proceedings, or infringe the core values of the Council. This includes refraining from editing an image or views expressed in a way that may ridicule, or show lack of respect towards those being photographed/filmed/recorded.

The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a child or vulnerable adult at a Council or committee meeting is not permitted unless an adult responsible for them has given permission.

Oral reporting or commentary about a Council or committee meeting by a person who is present at the meeting is not permitted.

The Council shall, as far as it is practicable, provide reasonable facilities for anyone taking a report of a Council or committee meeting and for telephoning their report at their own expense.

The Council's Standing Orders will confirm if attendance by the public, their participation, photographing, recording, filming or other reporting is permitted at a meeting of a sub-committee.

INTERVIEWS, STATEMENTS AND ARTICLES

No individual Councillor or staff, in their official capacity, is empowered to provide a verbal or written statement to the media unless the Council has delegated the authority to them so to do. All requests for comments shall be directed to the Clerk.

The media shall in the first instance contact the Council's Clerk if they want to i) interview councillors about its business decisions and action or ii) obtain a verbal or written statement from the Council about its business decisions and actions. Any verbal or written statement given by the Council's Clerk to the media represents the corporate position and views of the Council.

An interview by the media with councillors or staff in their official capacity about the Council's business, decisions and actions requires the Council's written consent. In any such interview, the media cannot ask about the personal views of the councillors or staff in their private capacity. Councillors cannot communicate their personal views about the Council's business, decisions and actions, other than the views they hold in their official capacity. Councillors and staff are not permitted to misrepresent the corporate position and views of the Council, or to damage the reputation of others in the Council or the Council itself.

The Council's Clerk may contact the media if the Council wants to give an interview, provide a verbal or written statement to the media or publish an article using the media about its business, decisions and actions.

Councillors and staff, other than the Clerk, cannot in their official capacity, provide verbal and written statements to the media, or write articles for publication using the media about the Council's business decisions and actions without the Council's prior written consent.

Councillors and staff cannot communicate their personal views about the Council's business decisions and actions, other than the views they hold in their official capacity. Councillors and staff are not permitted to misrepresent the corporate position and views of the Council, or to damage the reputation of others in the Council or the Council itself.

If Councillors or staff, in their private capacity, provide verbal or written statements or interviews to the media or write articles for publication using the media about the Council's business decisions and actions, any personal views must be expressed in their private capacity. Personal views held in their official capacity cannot be communicated. Councillors are not permitted to use their title.

WEBSITE

Councillors or staff must avoid making any social media communications that could damage the Council's official business or reputation, even indirectly.

Councillors or staff must not use social media or website to defame or disparage the Council or its staff or any third party; to harass or unlawfully discriminate against Councillors or third parties; to make false or misleading statements; or to impersonate Councillors or third parties.

Councillors or staff must not express opinions on the Council's behalf via social media, unless expressly authorised to do so by the Council or the Clerk.

In establishing a website, the Council must ensure that users can find the website; that users are clear as to who owns the website and what it is designed to achieve.

Council must ensure that contact points (whether email, forms-based or telephone) must be staffed and enquiries answered within reasonable timescales.

Council must ensure that links are up to date so users can rely on the website being available. Council must publish its current Accessibility and Privacy Statements on its website in accordance with government accessibility requirements.

If Councillors are blogging or tweeting personally, and not in the role as a Councillor, they must ensure that they do not act, claim to act, or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Town Council. Whilst Councillors may use a blog to draw attention to a particular local issue and call the council to account, as you would in a public meeting, blog entries ridiculing or attacking officers, or making serious accusations about their personal competence or integrity could amount to disrespect, even bullying, in some circumstances.

SOCIAL MEDIA

An employee's or member's behaviour on any social networking or other internet site must be consistent with the behaviour required of employees and members generally. Where it is possible for users of a social media site to ascertain your position with the Town Council, then you should take particular care not to behave in a way which reflects badly on the Council.

Inappropriate or disparaging comments about the Council, colleagues or the Town is not acceptable. Because social media interactions can be copied and widely disseminated in a way that you may not be able to control, the Council will take a particularly serious view of any misconduct that occurs through the use of social media, either through its Disciplinary Procedure or the Councillor's Code of Conduct.

You must not operate a social media account or profile that purports to be operated on or on behalf of the Council.

EMAIL

The GDPR regulations mean that it is not advisable for Clerk, Councillors or other officers of the Council to use personal email accounts for council business. There are 2 main reasons for this – under GDPR, people have:

1. The right to access all information that you hold about them
2. The right to be forgotten (ie have all information you hold about them erased)

Fulfilling both of these obligations can be difficult when officers or Councillors may have information buried within their personal communications. Also, if an officer or Councillor has left the council it is difficult and time-consuming to retrieve or delete all the information shared as part of council business.

It is the policy of Frodsham Town Council that all officers and Councillors will be issued with a specific email address to use for all council business as follows: name@frodsham.gov.uk. This email address must be used at all times for council business.

The information below is intended as a guide for the use of e-mail by the members and officers of the Town Council. Emails are a permanent record that can be produced at a later date (even if "deleted", they will still exist on a mail server somewhere).

Format

A sender of email should always:

spell check email and use proper punctuation and grammar; open email with a salutation and end with a closing and/or signature; thank the recipient in advance if requesting help or information.

Do not type messages in all capitals or in a red typeface. This is considered yelling or screaming online. For the same reason keep the use of emboldened or underlined text to a minimum and use only for emphasis. It is impossible within an email to incorporate verbal and nonverbal communications that normally accompany the spoken word. Do not forget that eye contact, tone of voice and body language that we take for granted when communicating in person is not available in the written word. The lack of these cues in email can easily lead to misunderstanding

Information

When corresponding about any matter related to agenda items or ongoing project discussions, ensure all Councillors and the Town Clerk receive a copy. If the email concerns a current subject (e.g. A120, footpaths, etc) emails should be issued to external contacts only by the relative responsible officer and copied to all Councillors and the Town Clerk.

Forwarding

Do not, for any reason, forward to Town Council colleagues:

- i. joke emails;
- ii. religious emails;
- iii. virus warnings;
- iv. chain letter emails..

Many "virus warnings" actually contain a virus themselves. Thus, when you forward the warning, you are actually sending a virus. Rely on virus protection software instead and report to the Clerk. When forwarding a message, refrain from simply hitting "forward" and sending the message without an explanation.

Carbon Copy / Blind Carbon Copy

A long list of personal email addresses at the beginning of an email gives an impression that the sender does not respect the privacy of those on the list. To some people, an email address is like their phone number that they want to keep private. When it is necessary to send the same email to many recipients, the recipients (with the exception of the Town Council) can be listed in the Blind Carbon Copy (BCC) field. A recipient whose address is listed in the BCC field will receive a copy of the email, but their address cannot be seen by other recipients, nor can the other recipients see their e-mail details.

If you are emailing a group (eg. other members of the Town Council) and want each recipient to be aware of who is being copied with the email, the above advice does not apply.

Personal Information

Never give out personal contact information of others without their specific permission to do so. Return Receipt Request (RRR) feature should only be used when it is critical to know when an email has been opened. RRR should not be used simply because you like to know when someone opens the email you sent - it should not be used as a matter of routine.

Angry email

Because people are not communicating face-to-face with email, they are often very bold when using this method of communication. If it is necessary to respond, do so in a courteous and professional manner. If it is not, do not respond.

Attaching files

The larger the file and the larger the recipient group, the longer it may take for the recipient/s to receive and open the email. Be mindful when sending an attachment that many people read their email on mobile phones and may not be able to open the attachment. Attachments should be sent using a standard file extension (eg. DOCX, PDF, etc) and virus checked.

Privacy issues

There is no such thing as a truly private email. Internet email is far from secure from a determined hacker and, as mentioned previously, even those that have been deleted can be recovered. The general rule with email should be not to send anything by e-mail that you would not want anyone to see.

The email address of a member of the public used for the purpose of communicating with the Town Council is confidential and the Town Council must seek to protect this information, unless the member of the public has affirmatively consented to its release.

The work of a Town Council is a matter of public record and is subject to the laws under Freedom of Information and Data Protection

When using email to conduct public business, keep the following tips in mind:

- Evaluate the sensitivity of the communication and the potential costs of inadvertent disclosure.
- Don't say anything in an email that you would not print on letterhead and sign your name to.
- Be descriptive in the "subject" line.
- Try to limit the message to a single subject.
- Use caution when instinctively replying to a message you have received.
- Avoid airing disputes over email.
- Be selective when copying or blind copying other recipients on a message.
- Be deliberate when forwarding emails.
- Protect privileged or confidential information.

Town Councillors should be aware that emails regarding Town Council business may be subject to disclosure and records retention policies of the Town Council.

Conclusion

Email is an amazing tool that has made many of our lives easier. As with any form of communication, using proper etiquette and complying with rules of common courtesy and applicable laws is essential to avoiding misunderstandings and/or legal liability.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES AND OTHER COMMUNICATIONS

This policy does not seek to regulate councillors in their private capacity.

The Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Council. If the views of councillors are different to the Council's corporate position and views, they will make this clear.

The Council's Clerk may contact the media if the Council wants to provide information, a statement or other material about the Council.

Subject to the obligations on councillors not to disclose information referred to above and not to misrepresent the Council's position, councillors are free to communicate their position and views.

All requests from the press or other media sources for a verbal or written comment from the Town Council, its Councillors or employees should be referred to the Town Clerk. No member or employee of the Town Council should respond to any media enquiry without first checking a response with the

Chairman or Town Clerk. All responses to media enquiries will be answered by the Town Clerk on behalf of the Town Council.

CORRESPONDENCE RECEIVED

Any written correspondence received that refers to Council business should be passed to the Town Clerk for action. If a Councillor receives a request for information under the rules relating to Freedom of Information, this must be handed to the Town Clerk without delay to ensure an appropriate response is provided in line with published timescales.