Torpoint Town Council Communications and Social Media Policy

DATE OF REVIEW – February 2023   DATE OF NEXT REVIEW – February 2025

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1. Introduction

Torpoint Town Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders. Communications is a complex topic and, contrary to popular belief, it is about ensuring good communication is at the heart of everything Torpoint Town Council does, not simply public relations. Currently the Council use the following forms of communication: newsletters, social media, press releases, website, customer service, noticeboards, the Annual Report and Council documents such as agendas, minutes of meetings and letters.

This policy will look at how the Council will develop its communications over the next 24 months, whilst ensuring everyone understands the fundamentals of effective communications. The overall aim is for Council communications to be a two-way process; to give people the information to understand accurately what the Council does, so they can make informed decisions and to get information from residents and stakeholders, so the Council can understand their needs.

2. Our Mission and Strategic Objectives

The Council has set out its strategy looking 10 years into the future. Our mission is to be open and fair delivering a sustainable prosperous town economy that protects the environment, embraces the whole community and recognises Torpoint's unique design and location as a gateway to Cornwall and the Rame Peninsula. We will achieve our mission by focussing on three strategic goals.
Community

To put the community at the heart of everything we do, providing opportunities for our residents, community groups and businesses, where no-one gets left behind.

Community Governance

To be a leading council operating within best practice and standards as recognised by the town community, members, staff, partners and peers.

Community Growth and Sustainable Development

To ensure the provision of assets, services and to influence the supporting infrastructure to enable the community to grow and flourish, delivering the Vision for Torpoint, whilst protecting and enhancing the natural environment and town heritage.

The Council's communications will endeavour to: -
  ➢ Promote democracy
  ➢ Raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence levels;
  ➢ Raise awareness of services provided by the Council;
  ➢ Support businesses in the town;
  ➢ Support elected members in their role as community leaders and
  ➢ Welcome visitors to the town.

The Council's communications vision is that our residents will: -
  ➢ Know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect;
  ➢ Feel confident and satisfied with the Council's services and its costs and
  ➢ Understand how to get involved with, or influence, the work of the Council.

3. What should the Council be communicating?

If the Council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then the following will form the basis of its communications strategy: -
  ➢ Direct communications
  ➢ Perceived quality of services overall
  ➢ Perceived value for money and information about the Council's Finances
  ➢ Media coverage
  ➢ Council performance.

There is also a need for proactive and reactive information: -
  ➢ Proactively – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
  ➢ Reactively – giving residents information they want to know.

4. Who should the Council be communicating with?

The Council's audiences are wide and varied, but will typically include: -
  ➢ Residents
  ➢ Town Councillors
  ➢ Town Council employees
  ➢ The media
  ➢ Cornwall Council and Ward Councillors
  ➢ Voluntary groups and organisations
  ➢ The business community
  ➢ Other public sector organisations (for example: Police, Health, Fire)
  ➢ Visitors.

5. Method of communication

The Council will aim to deliver core actions which, if achieved, would have a marked impact on the Council's reputation and the perceptions of residents.

These are:
  ➢ Manage the media effectively to promote Torpoint and the Town Council

- The Council will publish and distribute 4 newsletters per year to communicate with all residents
- Ensure the Council brand is consistently linked to services
- Maintain and develop the Town Council website
- Make best use of Council noticeboards for the benefit of residents
- Make best use of social media for the benefit of residents.

The Council will also ensure that all communication activity takes into account the differing accessibility needs of all, regardless of culture or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, gender, disability, age, sexuality, geographical location or any other status.

The Council's approach will be pro-active, sensitive to the needs, values, language and cultural differences that exist within its communities and will make communication materials available in other formats where reasonable and appropriate.

5.1 Media enquiries and Press releases

The Town Clerk will be responsible for all media enquiries and responses on behalf of the Council. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry. Press releases will be issued by the Town Clerk and will usually include a quote from the Chairman of the Council - Town Mayor. Where Members lead on specific town projects and in consultation with the Town Mayor – Chairman – then Members should be identified and able to circulate appropriate effective media. Press releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and alternative ways of communicating should be considered, e.g. newsletter, posters, social media etc. Members of the Council are advised that the media are welcome to attend meetings. During meetings Councillors and staff 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.

Councillors and staff 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 media that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.

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.

5.2 Election periods

In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (Purdah) all proactive publicity about candidates or other politicians is halted. During this period publicity must ensure that individual Councillors or political party do not gain any unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. This council is committed to sending out poll cards in the event of an election.

5.3 Ensure the Torpoint Town Council brand is consistent

The Council will brand its communications consistently, ensuring a single brand identity by: -

- Making sure all staff have access to electronic logos and templates (press releases, letters, etc.)
- Using a uniform font style and Council logo
- Developing a photographic library which supports the Council's brand and is available to staff, journalists and partners online
- Ensuring the brand is reinforced through visual media such as advertising.

5.4 Noticeboards

The Council will display official/statutory notices on the town noticeboards, currently located at the following sites: -
- Torpoint Council Chambers (Buller Road and York Road)
- Torpoint Library and Community Hub
- Link into Learning (window), Fore Street
- Costcutter Stores, Trevithick Avenue.

Community groups and organisations are permitted to display notices, which have been authorised by the Town Clerk.

5.5 Website Administration and Maintenance

The Council will maintain a website which is regularly updated and contains key information about the Council and important events. The Council will further develop the website to ensure it keeps pace with media advances. The website shall contain material that arises from Council business including:-
- Agendas and minutes
- Information about the Town Council, Town Councillors and Town Strategy
- Online enquiry system for booking Council facilities and general enquiries
- Reports, Surveys, and any other material derived from the Town Council
- News and local events.

The website many also contain: -
- Historical and geographical information about the town of Torpoint
- Information about local businesses
- Details about local community groups.
- Town Council Policies, standing orders etc

The website shall not: -
- In principle contain material of a deliberately contentious or offensive nature
- In principle contain material that criticises or implies critic of one or more members of the public, individual Councillors, groups of Councillors or the Council as a whole
- Intentionally contain any material that is defamatory or in any way against the law or which could expose the Council to legal challenge.

5.6 Mayor's Communications

The Chairman (Town Mayor) of the Town Council has a wide-ranging remit and can be quoted in media material as well as undertaking media work across all areas of the Town Council's services, as required. The Chairman represents the Town Council for civic and ceremonial functions and will be pictured and quoted accordingly. The Chairman can pro-actively communicate with local media and all press releases are to be agreed by the Town Clerk.

5.7 Monitoring

It is important to monitor media for items about the Town Council in order to ensure that press releases and statements are picked up and used effectively and to keep tabs on what members of the community are saying about the Town Council.

6. Social Media

Social networking is now a credible communication channel that is increasingly utilised by organisations, as well as individuals, as a means of developing online communities for gathering and disseminating information that is of mutual interest.

Launching our own Council pages has provided an effective real time, two-way communication channel. It has allowed us to engage with online groups that may not normally interact willingly with the Council and has helped us provide more people with access to Council services, allowing the Council to engage with new audiences such as the under 25's. It is a fast, efficient way of communicating as there are no lead-in production times for print or production, you can have a message up and available for viewing by your followers in minutes. Regular monitoring of these pages is undertaken, for when specific questions or issues arise the manpower is available to address the issues as the pages are launched. The benefits of Social Networking far outweigh any potential problems or difficulties.

This section is intended to help employees and Councillors make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as emails, blogs, wikis, social networking websites, podcasts, forums, message boards, or comments on web-articles, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other relevant social media websites. (Council staff have guidelines contained within the Employee Handbook and Officer/Member Protocol).

6.1 This section outlines the standards the Council requires employees and Councillors to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which the Council will monitor the use of social media and the action to be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

6.2 This section supplements, and should be read in conjunction with all other policies and procedures adopted by the Council, such as the Equal Opportunities Policy, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy, Data Protection Policy, Members Code of Conduct and such like.

7. Who is covered by this policy?
7.1 This section covers all individuals working at all levels with the Council, including all elected and co-opted Councillors, volunteers (the Clerk to the Council and all other employees must comply with the Employee Handbook and Officer/Member Protocol).

8. The scope of this policy
8.1 The council has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this policy. All employees and Members are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the Council, its services, employees, partners and community.

8.2 Behaviour required by the Members' Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Members will bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the Code does not apply. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. Members must be aware that their profile as a Councillor means the more likely it is they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking. It must be remembered that communications on the internet are permanent and public. When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the Council would be content with the statement should it be made public. Be honest and open, but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the council.

8.3. All employees, volunteers and members should ensure that they take the time to read and understand this policy. You are personally responsible for content you publish. Any breach should be reported to the Clerk.

8.4 Questions regarding the content or application of this section should be directed to the Clerk.

9. Rules for using social media

9.1 Employees and Members must not allow their interaction on any websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others.

- Do not make any derogatory, discriminatory, defamatory, abusive, obscene or offensive comments.
- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council.
- Never make false or misleading statements.
- Do not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. They must protect the good reputation of the Council.
- Be mindful of the information posted on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council.
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud." Use sentence case format, not capital letters, do not write in red to emphasise points.
- Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
- Do not post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face.
- Never name an individual third party unless you have written permission to do so.
- Seek permission to publish original photographs or videos from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before they are uploaded. You must check that there is parental permission before photos of children are used.
- Respect the privacy of other Councillors, staff and residents.
- Never post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, such as libel and copyright.
- Spell and grammar check everything.

9.2 Anyone who feels that they have been harassed or bullied, or are offended by material posted or uploaded by elected and co-opted Councillors, volunteers or officers should inform the Town Clerk.

9.3 Never disclose commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information. Never publish anyone else's contact details. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the Clerk.

9.4 Do not upload, post or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third parties consent.

9.5 If Councillors blog or tweet personally, and not in their role as a Councillor, they must not act, claim to act, or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council. They should not include web links to official Council websites as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council.

9.6 The Clerk will be the nominated person to act as moderator. She/he will be responsible for monitoring of the content on council pages, ensuring it complies with the Communications and Social Media Policy. The Clerk will have authority to instruct officers to immediately, without notice or comment, remove any posts from the Council's social media pages if they are deemed to be inflammatory or of a defamatory or libelous nature. Such post will may also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) and also the Council for its records.

9.7 The Clerk will appoint a nominated "Webmaster" to maintain and update the Council website. The website may be used to: -

- ➢ Post notices and minutes of meetings
- ➢ Advertise events and activities
- ➢ Post good news stories
- ➢ Link to appropriate websites or press page if those sites meet the Council's expectations of conduct provided that their terms and conditions of that website permit it
- ➢ Advertise vacancies
- ➢ 'Share' information from partners i. e. Police, Cornwall Council, etc. if permitted to do so.
- ➢ Announce new information appropriate to the Council.
- ➢ Post or share information promoting bodies for community benefit such as schools, sports clubs and community groups
- ➢ Post other items as the Council see fit.
- ➢ Facebook is used to support the website and its information as above.

9.8 Individual Councillors are responsible for what they post. They are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address, which is used for Council business. A council email account/address will be set up for all Councillors.

9.9 All social media sites in use should be checked on a regular basis to ensure the security settings are in place.

10. Monitoring use of social media websites

10.1 You should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether or not accessed for council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken.

10.2 Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances, constitute a criminal offence or otherwise give risk to legal liability against you and the Council.

10.3 Residents and Councillors should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.

10.4 If a matter raised in any form of social media needs further consideration by the Council it may be raised at either the Public Forum or as a full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of Councillors. Any response agreed by the Council will be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

10.5 Reports of any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should be reported to the Clerk for referral to the Council as required.