

CRAMLINGTON TOWN COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

1. PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define roles and responsibilities within Cramlington Town Council and give guidelines on external communications, contact with the media and effective use of social media.

1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to deal with issues that may arise and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1 The Council has a duty to the local community to ensure its actions are open and transparent; this accountability can be managed, in part, through effective two-way communications. The media is crucially important in conveying information to the community and, as such, the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with the media 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 It is important that the media has access to the Clerk and Councillors and to background information to assist them in giving accurate accounts to the public. To balance this, the Council reserves the right to defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public is properly informed of all the relevant facts.

2.3 Cramlington Town Council acknowledges social media as a useful communication tool. However, clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that its use does not expose the Council to security risks, reputational damage or breach of the Data Protection Act.

3. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. This statement also acknowledges the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014.

3.2 The Council's Standing Orders provide for 30 minutes public question time prior to all Full Council and Committee meetings. The rules governing public question time are attached as (appendix A). This is not part of the formal Council or Committee meeting and is not minuted.

3.3 The Public and Press shall be admitted to all meetings of the Council and its Committees, which may however temporarily exclude the public or the press or both, by means of the following resolution:-

“That in view of the confidential nature of the business about to be transacted, it is advisable in the public interest that the public and press be excluded, and they are instructed to withdraw.”

Such business is usually contained in Part 2 of agendas.

3.4 If a member of the press or public interrupts the proceedings at any meeting, the Chair may, after warning, order that he/she be removed from the meeting room and/or that part of the room open to the public be cleared. The Chair may adjourn the meeting for such a period as is necessary to restore order.

3.5 Audio or video recording and the taking of photographs is permitted in accordance with the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014.

4. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 The Town Clerk and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

4.2 Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible, with appropriate action taken.

4.3 When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from the Town Clerk before any response is made.

4.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Town Clerk and Councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (except Member contact details which are in the public domain), and 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 media.

4.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Town Clerk, the Chair of the Town Council or Chairs of Committees are authorised to make contact with the media.

4.6 Statements made by the Town Clerk, Chair of the Town Council and Chairs of Committees should reflect the Council's opinion.

4.7 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council.

4.8 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; such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. Such correspondence must come from the Town Clerk.

5. ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media upon request.

5.2 The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

6. PRESS RELEASES

6.1 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 the Town Clerk and Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

6.2 The Town Clerk or any Councillor may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Town Clerk 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.

7. MAKING INFORMATION AVAILABLE

7.1 The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by officers, under the direction of the Town Clerk, or delegated authority of the Town Clerk.

7.2 Council noticeboards will be used for advertising meeting notices.

7.3 Social media will be used for advertising meeting notices, events and delivering general public information notices.

7.4 Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with this guidance. Social media sites are in the public domain and officers 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.

7.5 From time to time, the Council may have to respond to negative issues and may become involved in drawn out conversations on social media. Councillors and Officers must alert the Town Clerk as soon as practicable, so that the situation can be managed effectively and efficiently to minimise negative publicity.

7.6 Council social media must not be used for party political purposes or specific party political campaigning. Officers must not seek to promote councillors' social media accounts during the pre-election period.

7.7 To address risks which have been identified with social media use, social media sites will be monitored to mitigate these risks.