



Communications Policy

STONEHOUSE TOWN COUNCIL

Adopted 22 June 2015 (Minute TC1617)

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To be reviewed May 2018

1. Introduction

Stonehouse Town Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders and has therefore developed a Communications Policy.

Communications is a complex, multi-dimensional topic and, contrary to popular belief, it is not only about public relations.

The overall aim is that Council communications should be a two-way process; to give people the information to understand accurately what we do, so they can make informed decisions, and to get information from residents and stakeholders so we can understand their needs.

The purpose of this policy is to ensure:

- that the Council is not exposed to legal and governance risks;
- that the reputation of the Council is not adversely affected;
- that our users are able to clearly distinguish where information provided via social networking applications is legitimately representative of the Council;
- ensure the council's information and data are handled appropriately.

2. Why is Communication Important?

Achieving the Council's aims and objectives requires good communication with every individual, group and organisation we work with, or provide services for. An important part of our role is to ensure that information provided is easily accessible, relevant and timely. The Council recognises the importance of communication and is committed to developing its own services to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

3. What Should The Council be Communicating?

- Information about the Council's Decisions
- Advice about our Services and those of other Local Authorities
- Information about the Council's Finances
- Information supplied to us about Local facilities and groups
- Public consultations and Public Inquiries

4. Who Should We be Communicating With?

The Council's audiences are wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents
- Town Council staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people and BME audiences
- The media
- Stroud District Council (unitary authority)
- Gloucestershire County Council
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- Local MPs and Ward Councillors
- Other public sector organizations (police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the county

5. Our Aims and Vision:

The Town Council's main aim through communications is to increase transparency and provide information for the benefit of residents, partners, employees, stakeholders and visitors.

The Council's communications work will:

- raise residents satisfaction, trust and confidence levels
- raise awareness of services provided by the Council

- raise the profile of Stonehouse
- support elected members in their role as community leaders
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people and BME audiences
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of the Council

Our vision is that our residents will:

- know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect from us
- feel confident and satisfied with our services, and their costs
- understand how to get involved with, or influence, our work

In addition, visitors to the town will:

- see Stonehouse as a wonderful town in which to live, work and play

6. Method of Communication

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

These are:

- Manage the media effectively to promote the Council
- Publish a regular council newsletter for residents
- Ensure the council brand is consistently linked to services
- Carry out regular consultation
- Maintain and develop STC website
- Engage in Social Media including Twitter and Facebook

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.

6.1 Manage the Media Effectively to Promote the Council

Our key points for effective management of media relations are to:

- Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time
- Be helpful, polite and positive
- Never say "no comment"
- Ensure any statements to hostile enquiries are cleared by the most appropriate person and keep written records of responses to journalists
- Ensure the appropriate council spokesman is fully briefed and available for interview if required
- Issue timely and relevant press releases using the brand template
- Add a Press section to the existing website which would include media releases, information and a selection of photographic material for journalists use.

6.2 Publish a regular council newsletter for residents

- Produce a quarterly newsletter of council information and
- News of local events
- Deadlines for articles and adverts will be 2 weeks before the final date of each newsletter
- Articles & adverts are to be sent to: newsletter@stonehousetowncouncil.com
- The format of the Newsletter and associated printing costs will be agreed by the Finance and Strategy Committee in advance of the newsletter being printed

- Once printed, the newsletters are delivered by hand by a team of volunteers throughout Stonehouse

6.3 Ensure that the Stonehouse 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 type 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

6.4 Carry out Regular Consultation

The Council is committed to consulting local taxpayers, service users, local businesses, service providers and our own staff and Members, to identify ways in which we can improve the services we provide. The Council will consult by:

- Inviting public participation at meetings of the Town Council and Committees
- By publishing questionnaires in the newsletter
- By publishing questionnaires on the website
- By inviting correspondence to the Town Clerk or through the website blog
- By holding consultation events in various locations in the town

6.5 Maintain and Develop Website

The Town 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
- Policies
- Factual information about the Town Council and Town Councillors
- Reports, Surveys or any other material derived from the Town Council

The website may also contain:

- History and Geography about the Town of Stonehouse
- Parish News and Local Events
- Information about Local Businesses
- Details about local Community Groups
- Links to local external (useful) resources
- Links to the District and County Council websites where appropriate

The website shall not:

- in principle not contain material of a deliberately contentious, offensive or disputatious nature
- or material that criticises or implies criticism 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 libellous or defamatory or in any way against the law or which could expose the Council to legal challenge.

6.6 Engage in Social Media including Twitter & Facebook

The Town Council will post urgent communications on Twitter & Facebook and use this media in connection with hard to reach groups

7. Responsibility

We will encourage all Officers and Councillors to be involved in providing updates for the website.

The responsibility for overseeing the administration of the website lies with the Officers of Stonehouse Town Council **and the nominated Media Councillor** to ensure content is appropriate.

Any Councillor or member of the public may submit material **to the Town Clerk, Deputy Clerk or nominated Media Councillor** for inclusion on the website PROVIDED THAT it is consistent with the general policies and also falls within any limits of technical feasibility to upload.

Content submissions must be submitted to a Town Council Officer **and/or the nominated Media Councillor** for consideration to be included on the website.

The following tasks would be deemed day-to-day website updates to be carried out by the Deputy Town Clerk (including sub-page content where appropriate) **and/or the nominated Media Councillor**:

- Your Council
- Meetings, Minutes and Agendas
- What's On / Events
- Your Community
- About Stonehouse
- Links
- Latest News (blog)
- Policy Documents
- Contact Us (if the Town Hall address changes)

Officers **and the nominated Media Councillor** are encouraged to actively engage with Social Media within their day-to-day responsibilities to include:

- Details of local events within Stonehouse
- Sharing photographs from past events
- Engage with residents when they have questions about what is happening within Stonehouse
- Notifications about press releases when they are sent out
- Regular progress updates about activities and projects the Town Council are undertaking (such as the Neighbourhood Plan)
- Help residents find information which they are looking for
- Inform residents and press about Stonehouse

Officers, Elected Members and the nominated Media Councillor will not be expected to:

- Engage in debate with residents through Social Media channels

This policy covers the use of social networking applications by Council employees, Elected Members and by partners or other third parties (including contractors) on behalf of the Council. These groups are referred to collectively as 'Council representatives' for brevity.

The requirements of this policy apply to all uses of social networking applications which are used for any Council-related purpose and regardless of whether the applications are hosted corporately or not. They must also be considered where

Council representatives are contributing in an official capacity to social networking applications provided by external organisations.

Social media applications are limited to social networking sites Facebook, Twitter and the Town Council's own website blog.

All Council representatives should bear in mind that information they share through social networking applications, even if they are on private spaces, are still subject to copyright, data protection and Freedom of Information legislation, the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 and other legislation. They must also operate in line with the Council's own policies.

Use of social networking applications in work time for personal use only is not addressed by this policy.

- All proposals for using social networking applications as part of a Council service (whether they are hosted by the Council or by a third party) must be approved by the Town Clerk first.
- Use of social networking applications which are not related to any Council services (for example, contributing to a wiki provided by a professional association) does not need to be approved by the Clerk. However, Council representatives must still operate in line with the requirements set out below.
- Council representatives must adhere to the following Terms of Use. The Terms of Use below apply to all uses of social networking applications by all Council representatives. This includes, but is not limited to, public-facing applications such as open discussion forums and internally-facing uses such as project blogs regardless of whether they are hosted on corporate networks or not.
- Where applications allow the posting of messages online, users must be mindful that the right to freedom of expression attaches only to lawful conduct. The Council expects that users of social networking applications will always exercise the right of freedom of expression with due consideration for the rights of others and strictly in accordance with these Terms of Use.

8 Terms of Use

Social networking applications:

1. must not be used to publish any content which may result in actions for defamation, discrimination, breaches of copyright, data protection or other claims for damages. This includes but is not limited to material of an illegal, sexual or offensive nature that may bring the Council into disrepute. must not be used for party political purposes or specific campaigning purposes as the Council is not permitted to publish material which 'in whole or part appears to affect public support for a political party' (LGA 1986)
2. must not be used for the promotion of personal financial interests, commercial ventures or personal campaigns.
3. must not be used in an abusive or hateful manner.
4. must not be used for actions that would put Council representatives in breach of Council codes of conduct or policies relating to Elected Members or staff.
5. must not breach the Council's equality and diversity or bullying and harassment policies.

Where individuals from partner organisations are involved and are acting on behalf of the Council, they will also be expected to comply with the relevant Council policies.

It is also important to ensure that members of the public and other users of online services know when a social networking application is being used for official Council purposes. To assist with this, all Council representatives must adhere to the following requirements:

1. They must only use @stonehousetowncouncil.com email addresses (or that of their own reputable organisation if they are not employed by the Council) for user accounts which will be used for official Council purposes;

2. Where social networking applications are being managed by Council representatives, appropriate feedback and complaints information must be published in a prominent place which is easily accessible to other users.
3. The use of the Council's logo and other branding elements should be used where appropriate to indicate the Council's support. The logo should not be used on social networking applications which are unrelated to or are not representative of the Council's official position.
4. Council representatives should identify themselves as such where appropriate on social networking applications. For example, through providing additional information in user profiles.
5. Council representatives should ensure that any contributions they make are professional and uphold the reputation of the Council.
6. Council representatives must not promote or comment on political matters or issues that may be regarded as such.

All users need to be aware that applications may be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities.

9 Enforcement

Any breach of the terms set out above could result in the application or offending content being removed and the publishing rights of the responsible Council representative being suspended.

The Town Clerk may require the closure of any applications or removal of content published by Council representatives which may adversely affect the reputation of the Council or put it at risk of legal action.

10 Media Relations Protocol

This policy is intended to give clarity to Elected Members and Council Officers on how Stonehouse Town Council will work with the media, and how they may be involved in that process. Elected Members and Officers should observe this policy as a matter of Best Practice.

10.1 Protocol in Relation to Publicity

Council publicity is strictly controlled by provisions in the Local Government Acts 1972 & 1986 and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 1988.

All media work carried out by the Stonehouse Town Council follows the provisions of these acts and the code. The general points of the code are outlined as:

- The Town Council is prevented from publishing, or helping others to publish, material, which may appear to affect public support for a political party.
- Any publicity describing the Town Council's policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both.
- The Town Clerk, Deputy Clerk and the nominated Media Councillor can only publicise the views of the Council. All views must be approved by the Town Clerk before being published.
- The Chair of the Town Council has a wide-ranging remit and can be quoted in media material, and undertake media work across all areas of the Town Council's services as required.
- On occasion, if the Chair is unavailable within the expected timeframe, the Deputy Chair in the second instance or Town Clerk or Deputy Clerk will undertake to deal with media work across all areas of Town Council services as required.
- The Chair represents the Town Council for civic and ceremonial functions and will be pictured and quoted accordingly.

10.2 Working with the Media and Deadlines

The Town Clerk, Deputy Clerk **and/or the nominated Media Councillor** should be the first point of contact for all enquiries.

Any Councillor responding to a journalist in their capacity as a 'member of the public' or a professional group representative should clearly state that they are responding in that capacity and not as a Town Councillor.

Some media enquiries will require a quick response, particularly in emergency situations. The Town Clerk and Deputy Clerk are required to support the Chair and Vice Chair to ensure deadlines are met. This ensures the Town Council does not lose its right to reply and has the opportunity to provide an accurate, balanced and positive account of its actions.

10.3 PR

The Town Council will be pro-active in approaching the media with press releases, articles and information that publicises an event, story or topical subject that is associated with and has a positive impact on Stonehouse residents, businesses and the local environment.

Town Councillors will be pro-active in communicating with the Town Clerk, Deputy Clerk **and/or nominated Media Councillor** anything they feel is worthy of publicizing to the media. The Communications Working Group should regularly at meetings discuss forthcoming events and potential subjects for media opportunities that where required are then discussed with the relevant fellow Councillors.

10.4 Content of a Press Release

- The press release needs to be proofed for errors.
- The headline and the first paragraph, in particular, need to communicate newsworthy content.
- A headline should be short enough for a Twitter update including a link.
- Bullet points at the top, summarising the main points, are helpful.
- The Town Council should not quote people who are not available for interview.
- Do not put Subject: PRESS RELEASE.

10.5 Recipients of a Press Release

- Weekly newspaper: Editor
- Magazine: Editor or Managing Editor
- Radio stations: News Director or PSA Director (if sending a public service announcement)
- TV stations: News Director

10.6 Responding to Press Enquiries

Press releases and statements will be prepared by the Town Clerk/Deputy Clerk **and/or The Chair and nominated Media Councillor** in association with other Town Councillors as required, and will normally be restricted to matters that have been debated and agreed by the Town Council. **Before being released all press releases and press statements will need to be approved by the Town Clerk.**

In some circumstances, a quote will be attributed to the Chair, Vice Chair or other Town Councillors. Where possible, a suggested draft response will be provided by the Town Clerk or Deputy Clerk to the relevant Town Councillors. The Chair, Vice Chair and all Stonehouse Town Councillors will be sent a copy of the Town Council's response to a press enquiry relating to their service/interest once it has been issued. This is for information only.

10.7 Political Press Enquiries

Journalists contacting the Town Council with enquiries that are deemed to be political will be advised to contact the relevant Town Councillor. Elected Members should make their own arrangements for issuing party political material to the media and ensure that the material does not use the Town Council's brand identity.

10.8 Talking to the Media

Any enquiry from the media is to be referred to the Town Clerk/Deputy Clerk/**Chair/nominated Media Councillor** and the author of the press release. No-one else should offer any comment without prior discussion, except to confirm basic matters of fact (date of events, spelling of names etc.).

10.9 Media Interviews

All requests for interviews should be directed immediately to the Town Clerk or Deputy Clerk. Where necessary, Town Clerk or Deputy Clerk will obtain approval from the relevant Town Councillor.

In response to an unsolicited approach from a journalist or reporter (this includes enquiries about press releases issued by other organisations), the views of the Town Council may be expressed subject to the guidelines above. The Town Clerk **and Chair** should be informed so that facts can be checked and appropriate action taken.

Other Members of the Town Council and employees who identify a media opportunity should refer to the Town Clerk, Chair **and nominated Media Councillor** so as to ensure the accuracy and consistency in any subsequent press release or contact with the media.

If a Member or employee receives an approach or enquiry from the media about any matter relating to the Town Council, it should be referred to the Town Clerk/Deputy Clerk **and Chair**. The Town Clerk **and Chair** will then make a decision, in consultation with **the nominated Media Councillor and other** Members where necessary, about the format and content of any response.

Nothing in these guidelines is to be interpreted as preventing, or attempting to prevent, a Member from expressing a personal opinion through the media, for example by writing to a newspaper or posting an item on an internet site. Members must make it clear that any views expressed, where different from Council Policy, are their own personal views. However, Members should take care not to misrepresent and/or bring the Town Council into disrepute, and must bear in mind their responsibilities under the Code of Conduct.

Employees (other than the Clerk/Deputy) should not contact the media on any matter relating to the Town Council unless specifically authorised by the Town Clerk and **Chair**.

All press releases and other materials are to be kept for reference.

10.10 Media Complaints

There may be an instance where the Town Council will need to make an official complaint against a publication. The Town Clerk and Deputy Clerk will need to be the first point of contact should this arise.

10.11 Monitoring

It is important to monitor media for items (reports, articles and letters) 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.

A copy of the Stroud Journal & Stroud News and other local relevant publications are to be obtained each week and relevant press cuttings taken and kept for future reference by the Town Clerk. Anyone taking part in a radio or television broadcast should try to arrange for it to be recorded and a copy sent to the Town Clerk. In the absence of a recording, a note of the broadcast's contents should be sent.