



Teignmouth Town Council

Public Relations and Media Communications Strategy

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Public Relations and Media Communications Strategy

Teignmouth Town Council not only has a duty to, but wants to be able to communicate effectively with the people of Teignmouth as well as create and seize opportunities in order to build relationships with the public and stakeholders whilst building and promoting the work that the Town Council does and wants to do therefore building trust and a reputation for honesty, integrity, transparency and accuracy.

The purpose of this document is to act as a simple reference tool for any Councillor or member of staff who engages with the media or who may be called upon to engage with the media. It can clarify roles and responsibilities and help manage expectations.

1 Introduction

As aforementioned, the purpose of this document is to help clarify the roles and responsibilities of Councillors and Officers in dealing with the media, and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest.

The Council recognises the need for openness and accuracy and this should be reflected in how the media communications are dealt with.

The aim of the strategy is to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be:

- Open, honest and accurate
- Proactive
- Responsive and timely

2 The Legal Context

This document reflects the guidance contained in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2001 (as amended – Appendix A) and the Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions. The strategy is to be read in conjunction with the Councillors Code of Conduct, the Staff Handbook, and the Good Councillors Guide. All publicity will be produced in accordance with the requirements as needed in consideration of equality and diversity.

This document will also explain how Teignmouth Town Council will help achieve the following objectives:

- Share and celebrate success
- Give information about policies, services and events, and about the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council's work
- Handle negative issues clearly and decisively

3 The Media

The Teignmouth Post (paid for), The Teignmouth News (free), The Herald Express (paid for), The Express and Echo (paid for), The Western Morning News (paid for) local BBC and independent radio and TV as well as national and occasionally international media have in the past covered stories about Teignmouth but in the main it is our local Teignmouth papers that report on media releases and local news stories resulting from local journalists attending Council meetings.

In addition, the internet and social media are vital media to publish town council news or messages. The town council does use the Teignmouth Oracle as a useful social media site in which to publish messages or events.

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify worthy news items as early as possible.

4 Handling Media Enquiries

The Town Clerk will be responsible for all media enquiries and responses into the town council office. The Town Clerk can delegate Officers take responsibility and deal with requests themselves if they feel comfortable to do so.

Councillors who are directly approached by the media should respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this document.

The Council should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual Councillors and Officers. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry. 'No comment' must be avoided at all costs.

5 News Releases

News releases are one of the techniques for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.

There are two types of news releases – Official Council News Releases and Councillor News Releases.

Official Council News Releases –

An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written by a member of staff and issued by the Town Clerk. It is non-party political and will normally include a quote from the relevant Councillor(s). This is usually the Chairman of the Council. However, in their absence the Deputy Chairman will be asked to submit a quote.

Official Council news releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a web based record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council.

News Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

It should be borne in mind that a news release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and alternative ways of communicating it should be considered e.g. posters, mailings, websites, social media etc.

Councillor News Releases –

Councillor news releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. They may or may not be political and should not include the name of any staff member, use the Council crest or the Council telephone number as a point of contact. Out of courtesy copies of intended releases are to be sent to the Town Clerk as the office may receive queries from members of the public about the Councillors new release.

Councillors seeking advice should contact the Town Clerk

6 Interviews

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.

Should interviews need to be given then it is the Chairman of the Council to do so and in their absence the Deputy Chairman.

7 Photo Opportunities: Civic Occasions

The Chairman or Deputy Chairman of the Council will represent Teignmouth Town Council at any civic occasion to which an invite has been received. Should neither of them be able to attend then the Chairman or Vice Chairman of Finance and General Purposes will be invited to attend. Should neither of them be able to attend then a Town Council Ward member will be asked.

8 Media Activity Ahead of Meetings

The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All agendas and reports (other than private and confidential) are automatically sent to the local and regional media and published on the Teignmouth Town Council website.

The media is welcome to attend meetings. During meetings Councillors and Officers 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.

9 Publicity in Election Periods

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (Purdah) all proactive publicity about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections. Conversely, Council business and the publicity associated with can and should continue.

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 Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant member of staff may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this document.

10 Non-Council Related Media Activity

Councillors and Officers 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 Managing Negative Issues

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.

Councillors and Officers must alert the Town Clerk 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.

Councillors and Officers will work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

12 Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

Should the media publish something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken by the Town Clerk on any action necessary to correct it.

This could be a letter, email, a post on social media or news release, or in exceptional circumstances to take legal advice. 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.

Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by accepting responsibility, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.

15 Monitoring and Evaluation

The Council will continually monitor the media coverage and collate it for reference.

16 Freedom of Information and Data Protection

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.

In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 2018 (GDPR) prevents 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.

Internet use covers all websites, social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter etc., forums and blogs.

If the above are used in an official capacity or on Council related business, the guidance in this document must be followed and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Under the consideration of ‘acceptable use’, when acting in the capacity of Teignmouth Town Council, websites and social media 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 political campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner

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.

The above points should provide useful guidance to prevent misinterpretation.

It is best practice on any personal profile for an online social media account to state clearly that the views are those of the individual, and may not represent the views of Teignmouth Town Council. It is also advised that the Council’s logo, or any other Council

related material is not used on a personal online account, for example, website, blog or social media platform as a profile picture or icon representing that account.

The following dangers could occur with the personal or Council use of social media (please note this is not an exhaustive list):

- Sharing images or personal details could lead to the exploitation of vulnerable people or groups
- Breaching a code of conduct, for example the 7 Principles of Public Life through tactless posting and commenting
- Bullying, instigating or fuelling online persecution or inappropriate debate through thoughtless posting and commenting
- Civil or criminal action taken against account holders relating to breaches of legislation
- Damage to a personal and professional reputation or the Council's reputation
- The accidental or intentional release of confidential information
- Virus or malware attacks through online sites or downloads compromising systems or networks relating to Council business.
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Any Councillor receiving unwelcomed comments, threats, or harassment online should report it to the police. Similarly any staff member receiving unwelcomed comments, threats or harassment on line should also report it to the police and the Town Clerk. If you feel your account is being attacked by someone acting as a 'Troll' it is best practice to ignore this person or persons and report the issue to the social media site on which the problem is occurring. There are also a number of options in relation to 'blocking' a person if the behaviour is particularly upsetting or abusive

In light of these risks, we should all be mindful and practice safe social media use and a Social Media Policy must be developed and approved by the Council.

17 Young People and Publicity

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.

18 Public Relations and Marketing

Production of an Annual Report each year to highlight key achievements of the last 12 months and set out the plans for year ahead.

Adopt a communications plan – forward planning in advance on a yearly, monthly and weekly basis.

Produce regular news articles and PR ensuring that these are relevant and timely.

Consider meeting with local journalists on a regular basis so as to develop improved relationships.

Take a creative and innovative approach to engage with the people of Teignmouth for example 'Meet your Councillor' events.

Use of plain English as well as adopting a friendly, approachable tone is to be used in all Council produced documents, website articles, press releases, letters, reports produced for Council meetings to name a few.

Consider developing a 'corporate style guide' so as to make all communications consistent in style and tone. For example use of logo and fonts.

Develop specific communications and PR plans around key events and issues.

Consider the benefit of an e-newsletter which can be placed on the Council's website.

How to reach the more 'harder to reach' groups? Develop a 'Peoples Panel' to use as a sounding board to gauge the views of the local people.

19 Training

Provide communications workshops for Councillors and Officers This enables those who may have to deal with the media to be confident and prepared to do so.