

Communications, Press and Media Policy

Introduction

Cockermouth Town Council aims to be open and transparent in everything it does. The Town Council will take every opportunity to communicate with our community and beyond the community, to raise awareness of the Town Council's work, events and activities.

Cockermouth Town Council's role is to serve its community first and foremost, which means we need to understand what people want and need. The Council will provide opportunities for members of our community to send us information and views in a range of ways. This information will be fed into our decision-making process wherever possible.

Our Communications, Press and Media Policy (CPMP) includes the general principles which underpin our communications. It includes a Communications Strategy which explains how we will provide effective communications.

Policy context

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity ('the Code'). The Code is statutory guidance and the Town Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions. Key requirements include that:

publicity by local authorities should:

- be lawful
- be cost effective
- be objective
- be even-handed
- be appropriate
- have regard to equality and diversity
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

The detailed Code and its accompanying Memorandum can be accessed here: [Code of Practice](#)

This policy is also subject to the Council's obligations which are 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 1998, other legislation which may apply, and the Council's standing orders and financial regulations which are available via the Council's publication scheme.

The Communications Policy also takes account of national guidance for town councils, for example "The Good Councillor's Guide 2020" (National Association of Local Councils). The Town Council's Standing Order No 22a refers to relations with the press / media and to the Town Council's policies. The Communications Policy and the Communications Strategy govern the relations with the Press and Media as referred to in that Standing order.

The Council cannot disclose confidential information, including information which is protected 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 publication scheme.

This policy is effective from 19/06/2024. It will be reviewed biannually.

Aims

This policy aims to enable public bodies, organisations, residents and visitors to understand and appreciate Cockermouth Town Council's governance, role, decisions and activities.

Values

Our communication, consultation and marketing activities will meet our values of openness and honesty, trust and respect.

We will

- treat everyone equally
- be prompt, courteous and respectful
- use plain language and avoid jargon where possible

Our Communications Objectives

Below are some of the objectives for our communications:

- To explain the council's work and operations
- To show how decisions are made by the council and any committees
- To flag up events and activities led by or supported by the council
- To encourage understanding of and enable discussion of the Town Council's work
- To share information from other bodies and organisations
- To send out alerts from health bodies, police or fire services etc
- To direct people to organisations who can offer support or solutions

Listening to our community

Communication is a two-way process, Our Communications Strategy will maximise opportunities for public bodies, organisations, residents and visitors to receive our communications and communicate with us in a way which suits them.

Responsibility for Cockermouth Town Council Communications

The Town Clerk is responsible for all communications from the Town Council. Responsibility for communications may be delegated to the Assistant to the Town Clerk at their discretion. The Town Clerk may direct the press to the Mayor, Deputy Mayor or other Members, for statements on specific matters.

The Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Council. Councillors do not have the right to communicate on behalf of the Town Council.

This policy does not seek to regulate councillors in their private capacity. If the views of councillors are different to the Council's corporate position and views, they must make this clear.

Internal communications

Email and virtual meeting software may be used for the day to day running of the Council. Most communications with Members will be via the official Email channels. Where there is an immediate need to speak to someone, from officer to Member or Member to officer, a phone call may be more appropriate. Members' personal Email addresses will only be used if the official address is not available. GDPR rules will be observed concerning storage of Members' personal contact details. Members will use their cockermouth.org address for all official matters, including casework. The Town Council will aim to transition to the .gov.uk domain for all emails and web activity as soon as practicable. An agreed Email signature will be used, including the link to the online Town Council Privacy Policy.

Correspondence and meetings with external parties

Except where Council has asked the Chair to send a letter, the Town Clerk is responsible for sending all correspondence from the Council to other bodies. Specific correspondence may be requested or authorised by the Town Council. The Town Clerk will also send correspondence on operational or other matters, by delegated authority as the Proper Officer. The Town Clerk may meet with other parties under the same delegated authority, to share and gather information in furtherance of the Council's objectives and to assist in informing Council decisions. Where appropriate, the Mayor or other members may be invited to attend specific meetings. The Town Clerk will brief members on any meetings at the next available Council meeting. Individual Members should not communicate with another body, statutory, voluntary or commercial organisation, other than in a personal or ward councillor capacity, unless otherwise agreed.

Social Media Principles

The Town Council will use social media where it feels this will benefit the community and the Council.

Our Social Media content will:

- be accessible for all
- be relevant, clear and factual
- encourage positive two-way engagement

We will be clear about Cockermouth Town Council's areas of responsibility. Where we receive a query, comment or other feedback which does not apply to Cockermouth Town Council we will do our best to redirect the respondent to the relevant body.

Cockermouth Town Council Communications Strategy

Introduction

Cockermouth Town Council aims to be open and transparent about the way it operates. This Communications Strategy explains how, when and why the Council will carry out communications. Who do we want to communicate with? Who wants to communicate with us? Stakeholders are the individuals or organisations the Town Council has a relationship with or a responsibility towards. We will communicate with them in a way which is appropriate to the message and which suits their needs. Our stakeholders can include: • local residents • area-based groups • communities of interest • faith-based groups • ethnic and cultural groups • local community and voluntary groups • web-based or virtual groups • statutory partners • businesses • visitors

The media through which we communicate

Cockermouth Town Hall is open for in-person visits Monday to Friday, 8am to 3pm

The main email address for general queries is assistant@cockermouth.org
Press enquiries should be sent to clerk@cockermouth.org

The Council will use a variety of media for its communications as appropriate: the Town Council website (which is central to all our public communications and serves as a repository of all council information), social media channels, news releases and letters to the media, interviews and statements to the media, notice boards, posters, flyers, newsletters, bulletins and meeting documentation, engagement events and forums, open days and celebrations. Other forms of communication are also available - consultation done online or otherwise, and in the public speaking session at Full Council meetings (items on the agenda).

Council website

Cockermouth Town Council website will contain a "Contact Us" option so people can get in touch directly from the site. It may also contain consultation documents and links to surveys or questionnaires the Council may put in place from time to time. It will be regularly updated with content from the Council. It may also contain information from other bodies and organisations. It may have links to other sites for information.

Less formal social media platforms are additional to the website and should steer people to the website where possible.

Other Communications

GDPR regulations will be observed.

- Meeting agendas and minutes are available on the website and are provided in hard copy to councillors only when requested.
- The Council's Annual Report will be made available on the website and will be publicised by a news release to local media and postings on the Council's social media.
- Other news items are sent directly to local news reporters and may be sent out to relevant contacts by Email and added to social media too.

- The Council advertises its events through a news release to the local media, in any newsletters, at the Library on Main Street and on the Council's noticeboard.
- The noticeboard at the side of the library and the Council Website will display formal Council notices.

The Town Clerk has the authority to remove from Town Council social media pages any posts made by third parties which are deemed to be offensive or of a defamatory, libellous nature. The latter will also be reported to the platform's complaints section.

Catering for people with disabilities

Cockermouth Town Council is keen to assist people who need extra support to read or understand communications from the council, or who need help to communicate with the council. Hard copies and large print copies of some publications can be provided on request for people with impaired vision.

Council Members – Communications

Where, after discussion with the Town Clerk and prior to formulating an Agenda item, Council members wish to pursue an initiative on an individual or ward member basis they are welcome to do so but they should make it clear that they are acting in an unofficial/ward member capacity. They must a) take care not to give the impression that the initiative has the support of the Council or represents Council Policy b) not raise public or other partners or external bodies expectations c) not do anything which may lead to negative publicity or which may reflect on the Town Council.

Members' Email to other persons

Members will use their cockermouth.org address for all official matters, including casework. This address should not be used for personal communications. An agreed Email signature will be used, including the link to the Town Council Privacy policy. Members should be aware that the Town Clerk has the right to examine all cockermouth.org communications. It should be noted that official emails and attachments may need to be disclosed under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Emails and attachments in private email accounts, should they contain official business, may need to be disclosed under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This could extend to providing the ICO with access to all of a private Email account and/or the device official business is stored on.

Council Members - Social Media

A Town Councillor who has their own social media accounts, whilst free to express their views, should use them with caution. It must be made clear that councillors' opinions are their own and not those of the Town Council.

Working with the Media

A request to Cockermouth Town Council from the media will be discussed by the Mayor and Town Clerk and then forwarded to the most appropriate person - Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Committee Chair or Vice-Chair, Town Clerk or combination of those people to suggest a response on behalf of the Town Council.

Prior to its release the Mayor and Town Clerk should be made aware of the broad content of any response, where they are not involved in its preparation.

Responding to third party communications

In responding to Media Articles, published letters, on-line comments, tweets, Facebook items every situation must be carefully assessed and in many cases a response will not be appropriate. In assessing whether a response is appropriate the following will be considered:

- Is the article / item in question factually accurate?
- Is the article / item expressing a personal view – and if so is that clearly stated?
- Would further discussion on the subject be constructive? Anyone seeing an article / item and thinking a response may be needed should inform the Mayor and the Town Clerk.

News Releases

- The Town Clerk, Mayor and Committee Chairs will identify issues and stories that have the potential to be of interest to the public.
- The Town Clerk will draft press or media releases consulting with the Mayor and Committee Chairs or any individual Councillor as appropriate.
- A copy of the final release will be sent to the Mayor and any Councillor who is quoted in the text.
- Media releases will be sent to relevant media outlets as determined by the Town Clerk following consultation with the Mayor. These are likely to include The Times and Star, The News and Star, Cumbria Crack, BBC Radio Cumbria and local BBC and ITV television.
- A copy of the release will be posted on the Town Council's website and emailed to all Members.
- A copy of the release will be included in the Town Clerk's update to Full Council along with a note of any known uptake by the media.

Council Members and the Media

The Mayor and the Town Clerk should be made aware immediately of all approaches made to individual Councillors from the press for interviews, statements or information relating to Cockermouth Town Council. Where possible, the enquiry should be passed to the Town Clerk to manage. A simple register will be kept in the Town Council offices detailing all requests and the response. If the councillor responds to a request for comment they must only respond in their capacity as an individual/ward councillor.

Please also see - A Note about pre-election restrictions on publicity

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/pre-election-period>

Risk

There are a range of risks associated with councillors accessing and handling information via email:

- Information and data security breaches.
- Unauthorised users accessing official Cockermouth Town Council emails.
- The introduction of viruses and malware onto the Cockermouth Town Council ICT network.
- The propagation of unwanted Email (spam).

- Users of the system using emails for improper or discriminatory use such as to bully or harass others.
- Damage to the reputation of the organisation.
- Users should be aware that deletion of email from accounts does not necessarily result in permanent deletion from the ICT systems.
- Email correspondence may be read by a person other than the designated recipient. Emails can easily be copied, forwarded or archived without the original sender's knowledge.
- Sensitive information or misinformation could also end up in the press and public domain, and could damage the reputation of the Council.
- The penalties for an email containing sensitive information being sent to an unauthorised person could include a fine against Cockermouth Town Council from the Information Commissioner.

Guidelines for use of official email by councillors.

You must:

- First consider whether email is the most appropriate way of communicating the message, particularly when dealing with sensitive matters or where debate is likely.
- Send all emails which conduct or support official business of the council through your official email account.
- Be aware that the recipients of your messages will assume that you are acting on behalf of the council. Communicate appropriately.
- Adhere to a standard that is considered professional and polite. Ensure that any statement or comment does not inadvertently cause offence or misinterpretation
- Bear in mind that emails often need to be as formal as any other form of written correspondence. Use a suitable header and include your contact details. Use an appropriate format for the message text.
- Add the Cockermouth Town Council disclaimer to every message.
- Check your incoming email frequently and ensure that all items that require attention are addressed within a reasonable time frame. If you will be absent for a period set up an automatic reply.
- Avoid the mass distribution/forwarding of messages, which can cause congestion on network systems, and can cause offence to some recipients. If you need to send an email to a large number of external contacts, or you want to attach a very large document, greater than 20mb, please contact the Town Clerk to advise of your proposed action.

You must not

- Make any statement or comment in an official email which reflects badly on the council, or which contradicts existing council policies.
- Send an email which is abusive, malicious, discriminatory, defamatory, or libellous about any person or organisation, or which may be considered to be illegal, obscene, or offensive material. (Before you send or forward any email, ask yourself if you could support your actions in a disciplinary hearing or in court)
- Forward jokes or messages that could be considered offensive by others or that could be discriminatory (as defined by the Equalities Act 2010) or send unsolicited bulk email messages or "spam".
- Send a message which could be deemed as bullying or harassment by the recipient.
- You must not make unprofessional comments about staff.
- Send information which may infringe the intellectual property rights of a person or organisation, for example, third party product information.
- Open unknown or unexpected attachments or emails from unknown sources if you suspect they may contain a virus. Contact the Town Clerk to report the email. Do not forward the suspected email to any other mailbox.

Policy Compliance - Monitoring of official emails

Whilst respecting the privacy of authorised users, the council maintains its legal right, in accordance with the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, to monitor and audit the use of official emails by authorised users to ensure adherence to this Policy. Any such interception or monitoring will be carried out in accordance with the provisions of that Act. The Town Clerk will monitor adherence to this policy by reviewing all official email accounts, including councillors' accounts, at least once in any twelve month period. This will be done in random order and at random times. An account can be reviewed at any time if the Clerk feels there is any cause for concern.

Consequences of inappropriate use of the email service. If any user is found to have breached this policy, the Town Clerk will advise the Chair of the Council who will report to Full Council, further action may then be taken. If a criminal offence is considered to have been committed further action may be taken by the council to assist in the prosecution of the offender(s). If you do not understand the implications of this policy or how it may apply to you, seek advice from the Town Clerk. Support will be provided for councillors to set up and use official email accounts.