



COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thornbury Town Council recognises the vital role that clear, transparent, and inclusive communication plays in fostering a strong connection between Councillors, staff, volunteers and its residents.

This policy outlines the principles and procedures that guide how the Town Council communicates. It aims to provide a framework for consistent, accurate, and timely dissemination of information. The Town Council is committed to utilising a variety of communication channels, from traditional methods such as public meetings and newsletters to digital platforms like social media and the council's website. This multifaceted approach is designed to reach all segments of our community, acknowledging the varying preferences and needs within it.

2. SUPPORTING POLICIES

This policy should be read in conjunction with other relevant policies to ensure a comprehensive understanding of our guidelines and procedures. Key policies to review include:

- Code of Conduct
- Councillor-Officer Protocol
- Freedom of Information
- Information Data Protection Policy
- Vexatious Policy

3. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CONSIDERATIONS

Councillors and officers should be aware that as a public body the Town Council is subject to Freedom of Information Legislation. This means that all data held, including communications such as letters, emails and messenger apps relating to Town Council business is available to the public. This includes information saved on personal devices and systems.

The Town Council must also comply with Subject Access Requests, whereby any individual can request information on the data held on them.

Councillors and officers should be aware that they could be required to disclose any information and correspondence that is held. It is prudent to maintain efficient housekeeping of records, both electronic and hard copy.

Councillors and officers should remain aware of the Privacy Notices in force, which govern how personal data will be used, and should give due regard to privacy of members of the public.

4. CODE OF CONDUCT & CONFIDENTIALITY

Councillors are required to adhere to the Code of Conduct in all sections included within this policy and it is the responsibility of each individual to ensure that their conduct aligns with these standards of behaviour

Practices related to confidentiality are applicable throughout each method of communication.

5. TOWN COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

The point of contact for the Town Council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Town Council should be addressed.

The Clerk should issue any specific correspondence as resolved at a Town Council meeting.

No individual Councillor or officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Town Council, a committee, sub-committee or working party. In particular, Councillors and officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.

Official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letter headed paper or on email with an appropriate Town Council signature. The Clerk may delegate the sending of correspondence to the Deputy Clerk or another officer where appropriate.

Where correspondence is copied from the Clerk to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (e.g. copy to XX).

6. AGENDA ITEMS FOR COUNCIL, COMMITTEES, SUB-COMMITTEES AND WORKING PARTIES

Agenda should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision, and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.

Generic items such as 'Matters Arising', 'Correspondence' or 'Any Other Business' will not feature on agendas. They do not meet the legal requirement to specify the nature of business to be transacted and represent poor practice.

Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda, for example where there is a need to demonstrate the noting or receiving of information for governance purposes.

Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information can be circulated to Councillors directly including via email. The Clerk should be copied in on such correspondence.

7. COUNCILLOR CORRESPONDENCE TO EXTERNAL PARTIES

Any official Council correspondence to other bodies will be issued by the Clerk, Deputy Clerk or an alternative officer delegated by the Clerk.

A copy of all outgoing correspondence sent by a Councillor acting in their official capacity relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, should be copied to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

Councillors are encouraged to engage with residents, whom they are elected to represent. Councillors should ensure in corresponding with residents where they are representing their individual views versus the formally agreed council position/decision.

Instant replies should not be expected from Councillors and reasons for an urgent reply should be stated.

8. COMMUNICATIONS WITH TOWN COUNCIL STAFF BY COUNCILLORS

Individual Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff.

Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Town Council.

Emails:

- Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk, or other officers; reasons for urgency should be stated.
- E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk.
- Councillors should regularly review and respond to their council e-mails and acknowledge receipt of emails when requested to do so.

Meetings with the Clerk or other officers:

- Wherever possible an appointment should be made.
- Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer.
- Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate Council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

The Clerk is able to provide advice to Councillors on any queries relating to appropriate communications.

9. PUBLISHING ON THE INTERNET/SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet.

The principles of this policy apply to Councillors, officers and others communicating with the Town Council.

Individual Councillors and officers are responsible for what they post in a council and personal capacity.

In the main, Councillors and officers have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Town Council Website
- Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites
- X and other micro blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- WhatsApp (see further guidelines later in this policy)
- Bloggs and discussion forums

Social media may be used to:

- Distribute agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Good news stories linked to website or press page

- Share urgent and important matters
- Vacancies
- Share information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc.
- Announcing new information
- Post or Share information from other related community groups such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities
- Gauge public opinion on a wide variety of matters
- Collate feedback from residents who live within Thornbury
- Refer resident queries to the Clerk and all other Councillors

When using social media Councillors and officers must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative. Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

Councillors and officers must not:

- hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- present personal opinions as that of the council
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the council
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- disclose commercially sensitive, personal, private or confidential information.
- engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- use an individual's name unless given written permission to do so
- publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- post any information that infringes copyright of others
- post any information that may be deemed libel
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence

Publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action and fine for damages.

This also applies if someone else publishes something libellous on your social media site. A successful libel claim will result in an award of damages against you.

Posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence. Breach of copyright will result in an award of damages against you.

Publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation and is an offence.

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence.

Councillors views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the council at a council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Pre-determination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Councillors,

officers or residents should report them to the Clerk.

Misuse of social media content that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

The Town Clerk is the moderator of the Town Council social media output and is responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies. The Town Clerk can delegate responsibilities to relevant officers.

The moderator retains the right to remove comments or content that includes:

- Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion.
- Personal attacks, bullying, insults, or threatening language;
- Potentially libellous or obscene remarks, information or statements that are of a personal, inflammatory, libellous or defamatory nature;
- Plagiarised material or any material deemed to be in violation of any laws, including copyright;
- Private or personal information published without consent;
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum;
- Commercial promotions or spam;
- Fake accounts or accounts that are impersonating others

Sending a message or post via social media will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and the Town Council will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through social media channels, but will endeavour to do so. The Town Council's contact details for formal communications may be found on the Council's website: www.thornburytowncouncil.gov.uk

10. WHATSAPP OR OTHER MESSENGER APPS

WhatsApp Groups provide an informal communications channel amongst Councillors. It is designed to share information, but not for discussion or decision making. At the outset everyone must consent to being part of the WhatsApp Group as their telephone number and full name will be visible to all within the group.

When using WhatsApp Groups, Councillors should adhere to the same high standards as with the social media. Specifically, they should not:

- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- post any information that may be deemed libellous
- post activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- Post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief

Guidelines

- Any opinions expressed are the opinions of individual members. Group administrator is not responsible for any comments posted by individual members of the group
- It is not necessary to respond to every post unless it is requested e.g., RSVP
- If your message is not relevant to the majority of group members, please message the person directly rather than the entire group
- Check your sources before you share

- Inappropriate posts include using inappropriate language, insulting messages, voicing grievances, fearmongering, arguing and heated exchanges will be removed
- We recommend that you do not post before 8 am or after 10pm unless it is an emergency, and you may choose to mute the group to reduce notifications
- Respect everyone's privacy, being part of a group requires mutual trust
- Avoid the sharing of media as this will be saved onto individuals photos on their devices

WhatsApp groups will be set for messages to be deleted after 7days.

An appropriate officer will be the administrator for the WhatsApp group.

Any non-adherence to this policy will result in the individual being removed from the WhatsApp group.

11. MICROSOFT TEAMS

Microsoft Teams is a valuable tool for facilitating communication and collaboration between Councillors and officers. The key features that can be used by council are:

Key Features:

- **Chat:** Instant messaging for quick and informal communication.
- **Channels:** Organised spaces for discussions and file sharing around specific topics or projects.
- **Meetings:** Video conferencing and audio calling for virtual meetings and collaboration.
- **File Sharing and Collaboration:** Seamless sharing and co-authoring of files and documents.
- **Task Management:** Creation, assignment, and tracking of tasks within Teams for improved workflow management.
- **Polls and Surveys:** Built-in polling capabilities for gathering feedback and opinions quickly.

Do's:

- Use appropriate channels for focused discussions.
- Communicate respectfully and maintain professionalism.
- Keep conversations on-topic and relevant.
- Engage in active listening and participation.
- Practice good security habits and protect sensitive information.

Don'ts:

- Misuse channels for unrelated discussions.
- Ignore notifications and messages.
- Engage in inappropriate behaviour or language.
- Monopolise discussions in meetings or chats.
- Forget to log out from shared or public devices.

- End of policy -