



Watton Town Council Communications Policy

Adopted 14th February 2017

Next review date	Date actually reviewed
February 2019	

Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for dealing with correspondence and working with the media.
- Provide guidelines on the use of electronic equipment
- Provide guidelines on the use of electronic communications

In the context of this policy, IT equipment includes desktop computers, laptops, tablets, smart mobile phones, network routers, modems or any other device which provides an electronic method for internet access, messaging or document storage. Electric communications covers emails, Facebook and any other social media tool used by the council, councillors or staff

Correspondence should be responded to and generated in a timely manner to ensure the smooth running of the Council.

Officers of the Council and Councillors must act with integrity when responding to correspondence on behalf of the Council.

1. Receiving Correspondence

Under normal circumstances, the Clerk, as the Proper Officer of the Council is authorised to receive all correspondence. Correspondence will be shared with Councillors as appropriate electronically or copies can be either requested or viewed at the Office.

2. Responding to Correspondence

As Proper Officer the Clerk will respond to correspondence received or may write correspondence related to the stated business and day to day management of the activities or adopted policy of the council.

It is noted that communications will be electronic when possible and this is the preferred means of correspondence. However policy is that correspondence with generally be responded to in the format received.

3. Working with the media

The Clerk, if contacted by the media for information, must only give the facts and the view of the Council as a body.

If the press contacts a councillor directly the Town Council expects any comments given not to deviate from Council policy or decision and expects councillors to act with integrity in giving a suitable response.

Councillors should not use their association with the Town Council for political purposes in the press or to promote business or personal interests

Photographs relating to Town Council matters should not be supplied to the press without permission from the Clerk and the Chairman.

Official press releases

The Clerk is the Press Officer for the Town Council and is responsible for issuing press releases on behalf of the Town Council.

Press statements will be clear, consistent, based on fact and in keeping with the council's policies, aims and priorities.

Should any councillor wish to issue a press release that is not already approved by the council it should be sanctioned by the Clerk or Chairman.

Personal press releases

Councillors can issue personal press releases. These should be signed in a personal capacity without the word councillor attached to the name. Each press release should also contain the following statement: "this is a personal statement and is not the view of the Town Council".

This guidance should also relate to other personal correspondence.

Confidential documents

Confidential documents, such as exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the media.

Attendance of media at Council meetings

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas are sent to the media on request. The media are encouraged to attend meetings and seating and workspace should be made available for them.

Elections

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for members and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that Council resources should not be used on publicising individual members.

The Council will not quote any councillor in a press release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for election. The only exception laid down in the Code is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member response to an important event outside the control of the Council.

4. Guidelines on the use of electronic equipment

Equipment, security and passwords

Staff may be provided with IT equipment to enable them to carry out the work of the Council at a time that is convenient to them. Any member of staff or Councillor provided with a laptop is responsible for ensuring that the equipment is properly looked after and kept secure at all times. The equipment remains the property of the Town Council and must be returned to the Council in good working order by demand of the Council or in the event of the termination of employment for any reason.

Any equipment provided for official use will have suitable internet protection software installed and operating. All equipment is to be password protected and have internet security software installed. Passwords must be kept confidential.

E-mail etiquette and content

E-mail, including text messaging services, is a vital business tool but an informal means of communication and should be used with great care and discipline. Consideration should always be given to whether e-mail is the appropriate medium for a particular communication. Messages sent on the e-mail system should be written as professionally as a letter. Messages should be concise and directed only to relevant individuals. Abusive, obscene, discriminatory, racist, harassing, derogatory or defamatory messages must not be sent.

E-mail messages transmitted on Town Council IT equipment are entered in the public domain on transmission.

Councillors using personal IT equipment to send e-mails on Council business are responsible for ensuring that their system has adequate internet security software installed and enabled. E-mails sent on official Council business should contain the approved Council disclaimer statement (available from the Clerk). Councillors should be aware that e-mails sent on Council business may also be treated as in the public domain and subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

In general, Staff and Councillors should not:

- send or forward private e-mails at work which they would not want a third party to read;
- send or forward chain mail, junk mail, cartoons, jokes or gossip either within or outside the Council
- contribute to system congestion by sending trivial messages or unnecessarily copying or forwarding e-mails to those who do not have a real need to receive them
- agree to terms, enter into contractual commitments or make representations by e-mail unless appropriate authority has been obtained from the Clerk or from approved delegated authority from the Council or Committee. A name typed at the end of an e-mail is a signature in the same way as a name written in ink at the end of a letter
- download or e-mail text, music and other content on the internet subject to copyright protection, unless it is clear that the owner of such works allows this
- send messages under an assumed name unless specifically authorised

- send confidential messages via e-mail or the internet, or by other means of external communication which are known not to be secure
- send a message without double checking that the recipient's address is correct

Staff and Councillors who receive an e-mail which has been wrongly delivered should return it to the sender of the message. If the e-mail contains confidential information or inappropriate material (as described above) it should not be disclosed or used in any way.

Use of the internet

Staff and Councillors should not use the Town Council's IT systems to:

- visit internet sites that contain obscene, hateful, pornographic or otherwise illegal material
- download or pass on such material to colleagues or external people
- perpetrate any form of fraud, or software, film or music piracy
- send offensive or harassing material to other users
- download commercial software or any copyrighted material belonging to third parties, unless this download is covered or permitted under a commercial agreement or other such licence
- hack into unauthorised areas
- gamble on-line
- disclose any confidential corporate information without express consent

Personal use of Council systems

Watton Town Council permits occasional and reasonable personal use of its internet, e-mail and telephone systems to send personal e-mail, browse the web and make personal telephone calls provided that this does not interfere with work performance or security.

Our policy on personal use is a privilege and not a right. The policy is dependent upon it not being abused or overused and the Council reserves the right to withdraw permission at any time.

All communications and stored information sent, received, created on, or contained within Council equipment is the property of the Town Council.

Use of IT equipment during Council meetings

Watton Town Council, as far as practical, wishes to adopt a 'paperless office' regime during official meetings of the Council and its Committees.

Where considered necessary for the efficient conduct of the business of the meeting, the Chairman or Clerk will arrange for IT equipment to be used to support one or more of the items on the agenda.

The use of personal IT equipment by Councillors during Council meetings (full Council and Committee meetings) is permitted providing that:

- the use is only to support the business of the meeting (such as to display meeting documents)
- does not impact on the ability of any other Councillor to participate in the business of the meeting
- the equipment sound is muted (not audible)

The Chairman of the meeting may require any Councillor using personal IT equipment to cease using that equipment if in his opinion the use of the equipment is adversely affecting the conduct of the business of the meeting.

5. Guidelines on the use of electronic communications

Watton Town Council uses a website, Facebook and twitter to publish information about its work to a wider audience and to improve communication with the public.

The Town Clerk is responsible for publishing content on the Council website.

A Facebook page will be established when appropriate to publicise council events and may be managed by either a member of staff or a Councillor.

When posting on these sites staff and councillors should:

- Be familiar with the terms of use on third party websites (eg. Facebook) and adhere to these at all times
- Ensure that information published is factual, fair, thorough and transparent
- Be mindful that information published in this way may stay in the public domain indefinitely, without the opportunity for retrieval/deletion
- Respect copyright laws
- Ensure that conversations or reports that are meant to be private or internal must not be published without permission
- Ensure that other organisations are not referenced without their approval (when referencing, link back to the original source wherever possible)
- Not publish anything that would be regarded in the workplace as unacceptable.
- Remember that they will be seen as ambassadors for the Council, and should always act in a responsible and socially aware manner
- Avoid publishing any information that they could only have accessed in their position at the Council
- Be careful if making 'political' points, and avoid being specific or personal about individuals.
- Not post anything in haste
- Not post comments that they would not be prepared to make in writing or in face-to-face contact
- Note use Council facilities for personal or political purposes.

Personal electronic communication

Councillors need to think about whether they are acting in a private capacity, or whether any impression might be conveyed that they are acting for and on behalf of Watton Town Council.

The Council has adopted a Code of Conduct which is binding on all members. If Councillors use Social Media in their official capacity as a councillor, they should always be mindful of the Code, and of the seven Nolan principles applicable to holding public office – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

Consequences of breaches

Staff and Councillors are to have regard to this policy at all times. Breaches of this policy by Town Council employees may be dealt with under the Town Council's disciplinary procedure. Breaches of this policy by Councillors will be addressed under the Code of Conduct adopted by the Town Council.