

Wivenhoe Town Council

Communications Policy

Introduction

Wivenhoe Town Council's interaction with the community is vital to its work and the decisions it takes. An open and constructive dialogue is a key requirement for influencing and developing services, identifying needs, and measuring satisfaction. Effective information, news and media relations are an essential factor.

Wivenhoe Town Council ('the council') is committed to the provision of accurate information about its governance, decisions, and activities.

Some key points to note:

- Care must be taken not to misrepresent and/or bring the council into disrepute or undermine any decision made.
- All media contact on behalf of the council must be referred to the Chair (Deputy in their absence) or the Town Clerk.
- Councillors must only use their official WTC email account for council business. All emails are the property of WTC and are subject to FOI requests. No council business should be conducted on a personal email account.
- When posting on topics with local relevance, it is good practice for councillors to state whether they are posting in a personal capacity or as a councillor; members of the public may otherwise assume the latter, especially when it comes to well-established councillors. Where personal views clearly differ from council policy, this must be made clear. Councillors should also consider that the language they employ, when posting in *any* capacity, can reflect back on the council.

Legal requirements and restrictions

1. This policy is 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. The council's financial regulations and relevant standing orders referenced in this policy are available on the WTC website.

2. The council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited 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 on the WTC website or from the Town Clerk

This policy is to guide councillors, and anyone employed by the council in their relations with the media.

1. The term media encompasses many different means of communicating information to a wide audience and includes the following: radio, television, internet, social media, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, and posters.

2. If a councillor receives an approach or enquiry from any organisation about any matter relating to the council this will be referred as speedily as practicable to the Chair, or Deputy Chair or Clerk. Remember that the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of information Act all allow at least three weeks for a reply, so never be tempted to make up an answer on the spot. It is always better to consult before speaking.

a. Where this is a matter where no council policy has yet been made the matter should be considered by the full council at the next scheduled meeting or, if of sufficient importance, at an additional meeting before a formal reply is given.

b Where personal views expressed differ from council policy this must be made clear. Care must be taken not to misrepresent and/or bring the council into disrepute or undermine any decision made. Councillors must take account of their role and responsibilities under the Code of Conduct, the Civility & Respect Pledge, and the Councillor/Officer Protocol.

c. This policy does not seek to regulate councillors in their private capacity, rather remind them of their responsibilities when they are communicating on council related issues. Nothing in these guidelines seeks to prevent any individual from expressing a personal opinion, for example by writing to a newspaper or posting an item on the internet, but always remember that no councillor should act independently. Therefore, make it clear in what capacity you are speaking. As an individual, you can have whatever opinion you choose; but, as a councillor, you are there to promote the decisions of the council. You have an obligation to respect council policy once made. If you disagreed with the policy, your time to say so was in the council meeting.

3. If in doubt, it is better to refer the enquirer to the Clerk, Chair or Deputy Chair. If no appropriate policy exists discussion with the full council may be required.

4. All official council media correspondence goes through the Town Clerk. No other employee or councillor should contact the media on any matter related to the council unless specifically authorised by a council resolution. Wherever possible the Clerk will prepare all written press releases or statements and copies will be retained. If these are being drafted by a councillor, they should be submitted via the Clerk.

5. The disclosure and sharing of information should normally be restricted to matters that have been discussed as an agenda item by the council except for requests made under the Freedom of Information Act, in which case, the Clerk will manage the response to ensure that the council complies fully with the requirements of the Act.

6. No information of a confidential nature may be disclosed.

7. No matter relating to the conduct or capability of a county, city or town councillor, council employee, external professionals, or persons who have worked with or were employed by WTC should be disclosed.

8. When attending a public meeting as a representative of the council, an individual will ensure that any comments they make are accurate and reflect the views of the council as a whole or, if not, that this is made known.

9. Councillors or employees of Wivenhoe Town Council are under no obligation to respond to anonymous contacts. In order to serve Wivenhoe residents effectively staff may need to request name and contact details.

10. Councillors should be clear on when they are making representations of behalf of WTC or as an individual. Any representations on behalf of WTC have to be cleared by the Chair/Town Clerk.

Information Protection

1. Councillors must not disclose information, make commitments, or engage in activity on behalf of the council unless they are authorised to do so.

2. In written communications, councillors should not cite or make reference to customers, partners or suppliers without prior written consent.

3. They must handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the council's data protection policies.

4. Social media sites are in the public domain, and it is important that councillors ensure that they are confident of the nature of the information they publish. Comments posted online are permanently available and can be used by media such as newspapers.

5. Councillors must not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal or publish exempt committee reports or private papers. This particularly relates to matters covered under Part B of meetings.

6. Copyright laws still apply online. Councillors must not use images to which they do not hold the copyright. Information shared should be attributed to the source (i.e. via web link). Councillors must respect fair-use and financial disclosure laws.

The Council's social media site

The Clerk will act as moderator for the council Facebook Page. Where disputes arise between members as to what should be posted to Facebook, and the schedule of the council meetings does not fall within the required timescale for the matter to be debated, the Town Clerk can contact the designated councillor, being the Chair of the Community Engagement WG, and they will determine the suitability of any 'posting'. They will be

responsible for posting and monitoring of the content ensuring it complies with the Communications Policy.

An Administrator will be appointed to maintain and update the council website.

The council Facebook page may be used to:

- Advertise events and activities
- Publish links to agendas and minutes of meetings
- Give details of public consultations
- Good news stories linked website or press page
- Vacancies
- Sharing information from partners i.e. Police, Library and Health Services etc.
- Announcing new information
- Post or Share information from other town related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g. Schools, sports clubs and community groups
- Facebook will be used to support the website

Individual councillors are responsible for what they post. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address which is used for council business.

Guidance for councillors with a social media presence

1. All security settings and passwords should be kept up to date.
2. Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the council when discussing matters pertinent to council business. Never make false or misleading statements.
3. Councillors should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the council. All councillors need to be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure that personal opinions:
 - are not published as being that of the council
 - must not bring the council into disrepute
 - must not be contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct or any other Policies, in particular the Equality & Diversity Policy and the 10 Pledges to which all councillors have agreed.
4. Refrain from using language that may be deemed as offensive, most particularly relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief, should not be published on any social media site. Be mindful of the Public Sector Duty under the Equality Act 2010 and the 10 Protected Characteristics.
5. If you engage in hostile communications, it could negatively reflect on the council.
6. Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.

7. Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
8. Respect the privacy of other councillors, residents and council staff.
9. Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, see [Defamation in England and Wales \(pinsentmasons.com\)](http://pinsentmasons.com)
10. Residents and councillors should note that not all communication requires a immediate response:

a. There will not be immediate responses to communications as they may be discussed by the council and all responses will be agreed by the Council.

b. The Clerk will be responsible for all final published responses that are submitted via the office.

c. If a matter needs further consideration, it may be raised as a full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of councillors.

d. Some communication from residents and other third parties may be required to be discussed at a council meeting. When this is necessary, the item will be placed on the next available agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting.

13. Care must be taken not to misrepresent and/or bring the council into disrepute or undermine any decision made and must take account of the role and responsibilities under the Code of Conduct.

14. Failure to comply with this policy may result in a formal complaint being made to the Monitoring Officer.

Email Correspondence

1. Social media guidance applies.
2. Council business must only be conducted using the official councillor email accounts. These accounts are the property of WTC and are subject to FOI requests from the public.
3. Care should be taken when drafting an email - remember anyone may see that email, for example later in an email chain or in an FOI request.
4. The staff will only communicate with councillors via the official councillor email accounts.

Safety

1. Councillors must be aware of their own safety when placing information on the Internet and should not publish information which could give details which could leave them vulnerable.

2. Any councillor receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the Chair, Town Clerk and/or the police.

3. Councillors should use a secure password and never share their password with anyone.

Councillors or parishioners who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Clerk. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this, and other policies could result in action being taken.

This Policy will be reviewed annually.