

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Clerk and CEO are inter-changeable titles, as are Deputy Clerk and COO.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Diss Town Council is committed to active community engagement through a widerange of channels, including online and social media.
- 1.2 The Council is committed to the provision of accurate information in respect of its functions, decisions and actions. Accordingly, great care needs to be taken when addressing communications within the Town Council and with outside bodies.
- 1.3 The aim of this Policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to staff and councillors about the use of media such as e-mails, blogs, social networking sites, podcasts, forums, messages boards or comments on web articles such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and other relevant social media websites.

2 Aim

- 2.1 The aim of this Policy is to ensure:
 - 2.1.1 Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Council based services through the use of all media formats;
 - 2.1.2 A consistent approach is adopted and maintained on behalf of Diss Town Council;
 - 2.1.3 That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social and online media;
 - 2.1.4 That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation; That the Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected;
 - 2.1.5 That communication is effective, timely, appropriate, useful, engages with a wider audience and utilises cross-promotion of other Council communication tools (e.g. website, newsletter, linking Facebook to Twitter account etc).

3 Scope

- 3.1 This policy covers all individuals working at all levels within the Council, including all councillors, the Clerk to the Council and all other employees and volunteers. For ease, the word 'personnel' may be used as a collective term in this document.
- 3.2 It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Town Council.
- 3.3 This policy supplements and should be read in conjunction with all other policies and procedures adopted by the Council such as the Privacy policy, Disciplinary Procedure, Members' Code of Conduct, the Computer, Email and Internet policy and Data

Protection policy. The Council's policies are available at <https://www.diss.gov.uk/about-us>.

- 3.4 This policy does not form part of any contract of employment and it may be amended at any time.
- 3.5 The policy covers all of the Council's online media channels, which are currently:
 - 3.5.1 www.diss.gov.uk – website.
 - 3.5.2 E-mail addresses linked to the diss.gov.uk domain name.
 - 3.5.3 Facebook - [@DissTC](#)
 - 3.5.4 Twitter - [@DissTownCouncil](#)
 - 3.5.5 Instagram – [@disstowncouncil](#)
- 3.6 Over time the Town Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this policy may be updated to reflect the new arrangements that it uses to communicate with people who live in, work in and visit Diss. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications.
- 3.7 The use of new media channels will not replace existing forms of communication. The website and other forms of social media will be used to enhance communication.

4 Legal Obligations

- 4.1 The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and GDPR applies to public bodies. The FOI Act allows members of the public to request information from the Town Council which must be treated in accordance with GDPR.
- 4.2 Town Council information is held by Town Council administrators and some is held by Town Councillors, although the length of time that information is held by councillors will not be subject to the Town Council's retention and destruction policies.
- 4.3 Town Council information held by councillors is subject to the FOI Act and must be made available if requested in accordance with the FOI Act and GDPR.
- 4.4 As Data Controllers of personal data (as defined by GDPR), councils must ensure the confidentiality, integrity and availability of all personal data they hold, even if the data is being processed through personal email accounts or is stored on a privately-owned device.
- 4.5 Personnel must not send, receive or disseminate proprietary data or any confidential information belonging to Diss Town Council to or from a third party unless authorised.
- 4.6 Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons, parent / guardian or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.

5 E-mails

- 5.1 Personnel will be provided with a dedicated diss.gov.uk e-mail address upon their appointment to a position within the Council (including councillors). Access to e-mail accounts will be removed for staff and councillors as soon as a relationship with the

Council ceases.

- 5.2 These email addresses can be accessed by members of the public via the Town Council website.
- 5.3 Personnel are restricted to ensuring use of these accounts is for the proper performance of their Council related duties only. These accounts should be the only ones used by personnel in relation to their Council related duties.
- 5.4 Town Councillor email addresses are prohibited to be used by anyone other than the Town Councillor to whom the Town Council email address has been assigned.
- 5.5 Any official Town Council business held by councillors in their own private email accounts is still subject to the Freedom of Information Act and therefore the individual account can be searched for requested information. Therefore no councillor should use their own private email addresses for Town Council business.
- 5.6 The use of email to exchange correspondence requires the same professional standards as other forms of communication. You should not send or forward mail which is defamatory or offensive for whatever reason.
- 5.7 The Council will audit and monitor use of the systems to ensure proper and effective business use. Privacy should not be expected in the use of Council email facilities. All email is stored and the Council may inspect an email (including personal emails) at any time.
- 5.8 No account details may be changed without first informing the Chief Operations Officer.
- 5.9 Councillors and staff are not permitted to debate matters of council business by e-mail. The correct procedure is for the debate to take place at a public meeting.
- 5.10 Junk mail is a hazard of internet life and efforts should be made to isolate it at source, if not it should be deleted immediately, and no attachments should be opened. It is important to keep virus protection up to date.
- 5.11 In order to protect from viruses, email attachments which might contain macros (word processor and spreadsheet files) or applications, should not be opened if they are from a sender whom you do not recognise, simply delete.
- 5.12 Email inboxes must be checked weekly to ascertain all correspondence within that system.
- 5.13 Arrangements must be made to ensure that inboxes are checked during times of absence due to holiday or sickness.
- 5.14 It is recommended that e-mails are retained for no more than twenty-four months before they are deleted. Those containing important material should be saved to a separate folder.

6 Email Etiquette

- 6.1 Email is not always the best way to communicate information as email messages can often be misunderstood and the volume of email messages people receive can be prohibitive to receiving a meaningful reply as a result of email overload.
- 6.2 The Clerk and Councillors have the responsibility of deciding whether email is the most appropriate form of communication and should consider the following factors before sending an email:
 - 6.2.1 The Subject - some subjects are too sensitive to be sent via email, e.g. employee information. Careful consideration needs to be given as it is the responsibility of the sender to decide whether or not email is the most appropriate vehicle for communication in these circumstances.
 - 6.2.2 Speed of Transmission - where information is needed to be communicated urgently and the recipient is expecting it then this is fine, however, if an urgent message needs to be sent and the recipient(s) is/are not expecting anything, then it is probably better to use the phone.
 - 6.2.3 Speed of Response - there is no guarantee that an email will be read as soon as it is sent; if the email requires immediate action, then this is probably not the best way to communicate. A read receipt may be used to help people who need a quick response, to note that the mail has been read. Instant replies should not be expected; reasons for urgency should be stated.
 - 6.2.4 Number of Recipients - do not necessarily use reply all as not everyone in the previous communication necessarily needs to receive the email.
- 6.3 When writing an email, it is important to compose the message with the same care and clarity applied to drafting letters and memos, particularly as emails form part of the corporate record under the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts.
- 6.4 Information and documents sent to your @diss.gov.uk inbox if distributed further must be sent from the same email address.
- 6.5 E-mails that are sent to external addresses should include the Council's standard disclaimer and signature format. Always ensure you include your name including the title Cllr and role if appropriate e.g., Town Mayor, Chairman of X Committee, the Town Council Website Address and the disclaimer as shown in the example below:

Cllr Joe Bloggs (Chair of Facilities)
Diss Town Council
www.diss.gov.uk

This email and any files transmitted with it are confidential and may be legally privileged and are intended solely for the use of the individual or entity to whom that they are addressed. If you are not the intended recipient, any use, disclosure, copying or forwarding of this email and/or its attachments is unauthorised. If you have received this email by mistake please notify the sender immediately before deleting it.
- 6.6 Always ensure that your Recipient List is appropriate to avoid causing a nuisance to other colleagues.
- 6.7 Email to multiple addresses outside Diss Town Council should be sent as a blind copy, (bcc). Messages sent to groups of people must be relevant to all concerned.

- 6.8 Always complete the Subject Line with a clear description of what the email is about as recipients cannot always distinguish between what they need to look at immediately and what can wait. For example, Full Council minutes March 2022 for approval.
- 6.9 Always use plain language..
- 6.10 Avoid using abbreviations and emoticons. Be aware that other colleagues may not know the meaning of informal abbreviations, such as FWIW (for what it's worth).
- 6.11 Be polite. Terseness can be misinterpreted. .
- 6.12 Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud." Use sentence case format, not capital letters, or write in red to emphasis points.
- 6.13 Be patient. Not everyone can respond immediately or necessarily have the confidence to communicate using email.
- 6.14 Never reply in anger. Take a break or sleep on it before responding.
- 6.15 Don't conduct an argument on email - it is unprofessional.
- 6.16 Spell and grammar check everything. Correct any errors promptly.
- 6.17 Always read email before sending it and consider the recipient reaction. Always use clarify..
- 6.18 Respect the privacy of other councillors and residents. Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Council policies or personnel.

Comment

7 Social Media

- 7.1 The Town Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of social media channels agreed by the Council and will be an administrator / moderator on all accounts.
- 7.2 Other personnel officially appointed by the Council may assist the Town Clerk to disseminate information. However, all must ensure they follow this policy.
- 7.3 No account details may be changed without first informing the Town Clerk.
- 7.4 Individual councillors are at liberty to set up their own social media accounts but they should ensure they comply with this policy and ensure that a 'personal view' disclaimer is used.
- 7.5 All social media sites used should be checked and updated on a regular basis to ensure that the security settings are in place.

8 Personal Safety & Privacy

- 8.1 Personnel should be aware that the information they post on their personal social media profile can make them identifiable to service users, as well as people they know in a private capacity.

9 Communication with the Media

- 9.1 The Town Clerk or Officers authorised by the Town Clerk, Council Leader, Town Mayor and Chairmen of committees are authorised to respond to approaches from the media provided that the statements reflect the Council's opinion and that they are matters pertaining to their remit within the committee terms of reference and roles and responsibilities documents. If an enquiry is received regarding a matter outside of the role's remit, please direct the enquirer to the appropriate member or Officer. This will help to ensure that the principles in the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity are adhered to.
- 9.2 Town Council staff who are directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves and should refer the enquiry to the Town Clerk.
- 9.3 The Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and members.
- 9.4 The phrase "no comment" should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

10 Council Press Releases

- 10.1 The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of all Officers and members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial but adherence to 10.2 is essential.
- 10.2 Any Officer or Member may draft a press release however they must be approved by the Town Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in the Code are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored, recorded and reported to the Executive Committee or Full Council prior to the Annual Town Meeting or Annual Council Meeting (whichever is best)
- 10.3 Official Council releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained.
- 10.4 All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate councillor.
- 10.5 Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual councillors, identify a member's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.
- 10.6 All official Council releases will be placed on the Council's website.

11 Councillor Press Releases

- 11.1 Councillor press releases are personal and are written and issued by the councillor responsible.
- 11.2 This type of release may or may not be political and should not include the name of any

Officer, use the Council logo or the Council telephone number as a point of contact.

11.3 Members may not hold themselves out to be acting on behalf of the Town Council and must not communicate as councillor in any other matter than in their official capacity.

11.4 Councillors are not permitted to use the title “councillor” in their private capacity.

12 Inappropriate Use

12.1 Users must not use online platforms to abuse or inflame others or to harass or threaten anyone. Responding to abuse, harassment or threatening will not be accepted as an excuse for inappropriate language and/or behaviour.

12.2 Recipients of abusive or threatening content related to the business of the Council must immediately inform the Clerk, Council Leader..

12.3 Users must not send or post content containing obscene, abusive or profane language.

12.4 Users must not forward emails or attachments without being assured that the information can be passed on.

12.5 Users must not publicise the content of email that contain confidential information.

12.6 Users must not send, access, display, download, copy or circulate information containing stories, jokes or anecdotes that contain:

12.6.1 pornography or sexually orientated images;

12.6.2 gambling;

12.6.3 gaming (playing computer games);

12.6.4 promotion of unlawful discrimination of any kind;

12.6.5 promotion of racial or religious hatred;

12.6.6 threats including the promotion of violence;

12.6.7 fraudulent or illegal material promotion of illegal and/or unlawful acts;

12.6.8 information considered to be offensive, inappropriate or disrespectful to others;

12.6.9 unauthorised and copyrighted material including music.

12.7 Diss Town Council will report to the police all known incidents in which users intentionally send or receive content containing the following:

12.7.1 images of child pornography or child abuse (i.e. images where children are or appear to be under the age of 16 and are involved in sexual activities or posed to be sexually provocative);

12.7.2 adult material/pornography that breaches the Obscene Publications Acts (1959 & 1964);

12.7.3 any homophobic, mysogynistic or racist material.

12.8 The above examples are not a definitive list of the misuse of social media but are examples to illustrate what misuse may look like.

12.9 Councillors or residents who have any concerns regarding content in e-mails or placed on social media sites should report them to the Town Clerk.

12.10 If inappropriate material is accessed accidentally, users must report this immediately to the Clerk. It can then be taken into account as part of the Council’s monitoring procedure.

12.11 Councillors must avoid posting views or discussing in advance of a decision to be debated by the Council or a committee meeting, that may constitute predetermination or bias. The Localism Act 2011 states that councillors must not have “had or appeared to have had a closed mind (to any extent) when making the decision”., (See *Localism Act 2011, section 25*).

13 Monitoring

13.1 Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

13.2 Serious breaches of this policy by a Council employee will amount to gross misconduct and will be dealt with in the way of the Disciplinary Policy or may result in legal or police action.

13.3 Serious breaches of this policy by councillors may result in a Code of Conduct complaint being submitted against them to the Monitoring Officer at South Norfolk Council or may result in legal or police action.

13.4 Serious breaches of this policy by members of the public or members of any other organisation or company may result in legal or police action.