



## COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA POLICY

### Introduction

Credition Town Council receives enquiries from the media, constituents and wider members of the public every year.

The purpose of this protocol is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Clerk, Mayor, all employees and all Councillors and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest.

The aim of the protocol is to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's outside communications should be:

- Open and honest
- Proactive
- Responsive and timely

This protocol acts as a reference tool for any employee or Councillor who engages with the media or communicates with members of the public. It also includes guidance on personal use of social media where it could be deemed to have a negative impact on the Council's reputation.

This protocol applies to all Town Council employees and Councillors.

### Legal Issues

There are circumstances under which employers can be held legally responsible for content published by their employees. This may include action taken as part of their role for the organisation and material published on official organisation channels or somewhere that has been previously sanctioned by the Town Council. It is therefore important to make all employees aware of the potential legal issues with regards to communication.

It is important that employees are aware that communicating information about the Council cannot be isolated from their working life. For example any information published online can be accessed around the world within seconds and will be publicly available for all to see.

Employees and Councillors should take the following into consideration when using social media:

- Be aware of the Council guidelines for using social media, whether this is for personal use or as a part of their working role (See "SOCIAL MEDIA").
- Be familiar with the legal areas outlined below before writing or speaking about colleagues or sharing information about the Council.
- Ensure that verbal or written information does not disclose privileged or confidential information.



## **Libel and defamation**

Defamation is the act of making a statement about a person or company that is considered to harm reputation, for example, by lowering others' estimation of the person or company, or by causing them to lose their rank or professional standing. If the defamatory statement is written down (in print or online) it is known as libel. If it is spoken, it is known as slander. There are exceptions to this - posting a defamatory statement online or recording it on a podcast would both be examples of libel.

## **Other points to note**

An organisation may be held responsible for something an employee has written or said if it is on behalf of the company or on a company-sanctioned space. Action can also be taken against anyone repeating libelous information from another source, so careful checks are needed before quoting statements from websites. This can also apply to linking to defamatory information. You should consider whether a statement can be proved before writing or using it – in law, the onus is on the person making the statement to establish its truth.

## **Publicity**

The media play a huge role in informing residents about what the Council does and how it spends their money (at all tiers of Government). It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible will take a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews. This approach will help achieve the following objectives:

- Ensure that the Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and which listens
- Share and celebrate the Council's successes
- Give information about policies and services and about the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council's work
- Handle negative issues clearly and decisively

## **Publicity in Election Periods**

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself all proactive publicity from the Council about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections.

During this period council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Councillors or groups of Councillors. This is to make sure that no individual or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this protocol.



## **Young People and Publicity**

Guidelines should be followed if commissioning photographs of children (i.e. under 18 years of age) or if planning photography of children at events and using visual media for publicity purposes.

## **The Media**

The local press generally only covers stories relevant to people living and working in Credition and the immediate surrounding areas for example the Credition Courier. Other local media include radio stations such as BBC Devon, Heart FM, and Radio Exe all of which have specific target audiences.

Regional media includes newspapers like the Western Morning News.

It is rare that Credition Town Council would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level however, the protocol remains pertinent in these cases.

## **Identifying Newsworthy Items and Handling Media Enquiries**

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify worthy news items and this should be done as early as possible. These might include Mayoral engagements, the Christmas Markets or promoting successes of the Council. Ideas for news items should be sent to the Clerk.

The Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the office. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the lead officer, Councillor or the Mayor to respond to the enquiry, in line with this protocol.

Council officers who are directly approached by a member of the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without gleaning the full facts and should confer with the Clerk before responding. However simple, factual queries will be dealt with appropriately by the office.

Councillors who are directly approached by a member of the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol.

The Council should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Councillors. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

## **News or Press Releases**

News / press releases are one of the key techniques for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.



There are two types of press releases – Official Council Press Releases and Councillor Press Releases.

## Official Council Press Releases:

An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written by an officer and authorised by the Clerk. It is non-party political and will normally include a quote from the relevant Councillor(s). This is usually the Mayor or Committee Chair.

Official Council press releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and include an approved quotation from the appropriate Councillor. Matters of style, presentation, punctuation, grammar etc are the responsibility of the author.

Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official Council news/press releases will be placed on the Council's website within three working days of issue.

It should be borne in mind that a news or press release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and alternative ways of advertising it should be considered e.g. posters, mailings, websites, social networking etc.

## Councillor Press Releases:

Councillors can issue personal press releases, and these should be signed in a personal capacity without the word Councillor attached to the name. Such press releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. This 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. It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases, especially those of a factual nature, to be provided to the Clerk. Councillors seeking advice can contact the Clerk.

## **Interviews**

Any officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to the Clerk, the Mayor or the appropriate Committee Chair. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist.

Officers should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.



## **Media Activity Ahead of Meetings**

The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All Council and Committee agendas are automatically published on the Credition Town Council website.

Members of the media are welcome to attend and regularly do attend Council and Committee meetings. During meetings Members should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture, rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what can be a complex issue or report.

## **Non-Council Related Media Activity**

Officers and Members of the Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-Council related organisations must not refer to their Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.

## **Managing Negative Issues**

From time to time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Members and Officers must alert the Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest comes to light. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

Members and Officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

## **Correcting Inaccurate Reporting**

Should the media (a newspaper or broadcaster) publish/broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

The issue should be discussed with the Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. Also to decide who the most appropriate person is to take the necessary agreed action i.e. the Mayor, Committee Chairman or Lead Officer.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain. Each case must be judged individually.

Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by holding hands up, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.



## **NEWSLETTER**

Quarterly, the Council creates its own newsletter. It aims to promote council policies, services, activities and initiatives. The content is created in house in consultation with any appropriate Councillors. Ideas for articles will be welcomed and these should be passed directly to the Clerk.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

### **What is social media?**

'Social media' is the term commonly given to websites, online tools and other Information Communication Technologies (ICT) which allow users to interact with each other in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. As the name implies, social media involves the building of communities or networks, encouraging participation and engagement. This protocol will also apply to any new or emerging technologies or systems which may develop in the future.

Current examples include, podcasts, message boards, social networking, such as Facebook, Twitter, bebo and MySpace, and content sharing websites such as Flickr and YouTube.

### **The aims of this protocol are:**

- To ensure that social media used to communicate with the public, partners or other stakeholders by all Town Council staff in the performance of their duties are aligned to the view of the Town Council.
- To ensure that all Town Council social media sites are easily identifiable as originating from the Town Council and correctly apply the council's logo and brand guidelines.
- To protect the reputation of the Town Council while embracing the possibilities of this channel.
- To ensure that any Council communication through social media meets legal requirements and is consistent with other communication activities.
- To prevent the unauthorised use of Town Council branding on employees' or Councillors personal social media sites.

### **Applying this protocol: Council-run channels**

- Town Council staff and Councillors considering the use of, or wishing to use, social media as a channel for a project or campaign must first discuss and agree this with the Town Clerk and Mayor.
- Social media channels already featuring the Council's logo or branding must comply with brand guidelines.
- The unauthorised use of the Town Council logo or branding on social media channels may result in action under the disciplinary procedure.
- The Town Clerk and/or the Assistant to the Town Clerk & Mayor will be responsible for maintaining the Council's profile on the relevant social media sites.
- Other members of staff and Councillors may assist the Town Clerk and/or the Assistant to the Town Clerk & Mayor at the Town Clerk's discretion.



- Care must be taken by multiple account users when posting to social media sites, to ensure activity is being assigned to the correct account.
- It is recommended that posts to social media are reviewed by a colleague or Councillor before publication to avoid unintentional errors being posted.
- Social media will be used to enable the Council to:
  - Engage with individuals and communities
  - Promote council services
  - Announce the date of forthcoming meetings
  - Cross promote other council communication tools e.g. website, press releases, linking Facebook to Twitter account etc.
  - Providing information on local events, council initiatives and achievements
  - Advise on maintenance work due to be carried out.
  - Bring relevant local information to the attention of the community

### **Applying this protocol: personal use of social media channels**

If you already make reference to your employment/involvement in the Council on a personal internet site as defined above, or you intend to create such a site, you should inform the Town Clerk who will advise you of the appropriateness of doing this in line with the advice below:

- Do not engage in activities on the internet that might bring the Council into disrepute.
- Do not use the Council logo on personal web pages.
- Do not reveal information which is confidential to the Council - consult the Town Clerk if you are unsure.
- Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or staff without their permission.
- Under no circumstance should offensive comments be made about the Council, Councillors, or colleagues on the Internet. This may amount to cyber-bullying or defamation and could be deemed a disciplinary offence.

### **Social media campaigns**

Employees or Councillors who are considering social media campaigns should firstly consult the Town Clerk for guidance. Coordinating efforts and using a corporate account can ensure that the project has a clear purpose, fits into the existing Town Council views and is suitable for the target audience they wish to reach.

### **Social Media Tips and Advice**

Social Media or Social Networking is both a broadcast medium and a receiving medium.

#### From the business point of view:

- It can be used as a receiving medium to gather opinions about the Council which have appeared on the social media networks. As such it is an invaluable tool to add to our understanding of what people think about us. As such this is a benign and useful tool.
- It is possible to broadcast using the same social media networks to engage with and talk to those who are interested enough to have a view. As such it is a useful and powerful tool.



## From a personal point of view:

- Individuals employed by the council are entitled to use whatever system they like outside of their working time and working persona, to engage in the social aspects of the media – both broadcasting and receiving.
- However great care should be taken to ensure the private/work line is not crossed.
- It is good practice to follow the stricture of never mentioning work, your opinions of your colleagues or processes and projects on your own private Social Media Networks. This aspect is covered in '*LEGAL ISSUES*'.

## **Freedom of Information and Data Protection**

Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (email or written), normally that correspondence would have to be disclosed, unless it was exempt. The fact that the disclosure of the correspondence may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.

In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

Refer to the Information Policy, Chapter 14 of the Council Constitution for further information and guidelines in this respect.

## **Internet Acceptable Use Policy**

Internet use covers all websites (including the Credition Town Council website), networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Bebo etc, forums and blogs which may be used by both Officers and Councillors.

If the above are used in an official capacity or on Council related business, the guidance in this protocol must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Under the consideration of Acceptable Use, when acting in the capacity of Credition Town Council, websites should not:

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or used for campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner



# Credition Town Council

- If social media is used in an unofficial capacity, Members and Officers should restrain from making remarks that could be construed as bringing the Council into disrepute. Please see "SOCIAL MEDIA".