



Media Relations and Social Media including rules for public Protocol

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If you require any support in understanding or applying this policy, please contact the Corporate Services Manager. In addition, in line with the Equality Act 2010, we will make reasonable adjustments to remove or reduce disadvantages faced by disabled employees, Councillors, or applicants.

1- Introduction

- 1.1 This protocol has been drawn up to provide clear and consistent guidance to Council Members and Officers on how the Council communicates effectively and impartially with the public via the media.
- 1.2 The Media Relations Protocol supports the work of the Town Council to increase public awareness of its services provided and the functions it performs; to allow local people to have a real and informed say about issues that affect them; to explain the reasons to electors and council taxpayers for particular policies and priorities; and in general, to improve local accountability.
- 1.3 For the purpose of understanding the Media Relations Protocol, the term 'Media' refers to relations with the press and media, including but not limited to press releases, press statements and media enquiries.
- 1.4 Media releases are one of the key techniques for publicising Town Council activities, decisions and achievements.
- 1.5 All media relations activity should reflect the principles of confidentiality, data protection, freedom of information and copyright, in addition to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011, with reference to the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988.
- 1.6 The overriding principle of this protocol is that all elements of the media will be treated equally.
- 1.7 It is important that all Members and Officers who might contact the media understand the implications of the Media Relations Protocol. Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to ensure that the media releases and public communication messages issued by the Town Council are consistent and accurate.

2- Responding to Media Enquiries

- 2.1 The Town Council respects the media's role in delivering information to the public and responses will be given in recognition of deadlines, which are crucial to effective media relations.

- 2.2 The media are very important in conveying information to the community, so the Town Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations at all times.
- 2.3 The media work on behalf of the local community to hold the Town Council to account for its policies and actions, and it is therefore important that they have access to Officers and Members (and to background information to help them in this role).
- 2.4 Requests for interviews, information or photographs from the media should be referred initially to the Communications Officer. Any response will be collated in conjunction with the Corporate Services Manager and Communications Officer.
- 2.5 If appropriate, responses will be given by;
- the relevant Committee Chair (or in their absence, Committee Vice-Chair) and/or
 - the proposer of any motion (or in their absence, the seconder of the motion) and/or
 - the Mayor and/or
 - the Deputy Mayor and/or
 - the leaders of the relevant Member groups as the public face of the Council.
- 2.6 All responses will be signed off/approved by the Corporate Services Manager prior to transmission to the media.
- 2.7 The Town Council recognises that Members have private lives and may be approached directly by the media in relation to their roles outside of the Council. In this instance, Members should make it clear they are not commenting on behalf of the Town Council.
- 2.8 Requests to take photographs of Members or Officers in relation to Town Council business must be agreed by the individual and by the Corporate Services Manager.
- 2.9 There is no out-of-hours media relations service, although Members can be contacted outside of normal office hours if their contact details are available in the public domain.
- 2.10 The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry from the media.

3 Media Release: Principles

- 3.1 In addition to responding to requests from the media, the Town Council will proactively issue media releases and distribute them to the relevant media outlets.
- 3.2 Media releases will be fair, honest, informed, balanced, accurate and non-party political.
- 3.3 Media releases must “not be a prejudiced, unreasoning or political attack on the policies or proposals in question or on those putting them forward.” They must not criticise another part of the Town Council or other local authorities or organisations, but may question, query or scrutinise.
- 3.4 Media releases issued in the name of the Town Council will not persuade members of the public to hold a particular view, political or otherwise. Media releases must reflect the Town Council’s stated policy or agreed action by elected members.

3.5 Officers and Members have a responsibility to identify newsworthy items and proactively seek opportunities where it may be beneficial to issue a news release.

4 Media Releases: Proactivity

4.1 The Town Council identifies activities and services provided by the Town Council and how these can be used to can achieve effective publicity.

4.2 The Town Council may proactively issue media releases in a range of circumstances and in conjunction with other agencies. For example:

- To inform about a decision by the Town Council or one of its committees.
- To publicise changes to one or more Town Council services.
- To promote a Town Council or community event.
- To publicise a campaign or raise awareness of a topic of local interest.
- To disseminate good news for Hailsham.
- To publicise the Town Council's good practice.
- To raise Hailsham's profile in support of the Town Council's core objectives.
- To announce an appointment on the Town Council or an upcoming election.
- To promote the activities of the Town Mayor, including civic engagements.
- The content of proactive media releases is drawn up in consultation with relevant officers to ensure factual accuracy.

5 Publicity Requests from Members

5.1 Requests by Members for media releases to be drafted and issued can be made to help the Town Council maintain a strong identity with residents and to communicate stories. Occasionally, Members ask for media releases to be drafted and issued to publicise issues or events in the ward or relevant to the Committee in which they sit, which accord with Council policy.

6 Media Releases: Governance

6.1 The content of all media releases should be approved by the Corporate Services Manager prior to distribution to the local press and media.

6.2 Media release drafts should also be sent to the appropriate Committee Chair, or in their absence the Vice Chair, with responsibility for the issue concerned (if applicable) for approval prior to distribution of the media release to the media. Additionally, any (other) person who has a quote attributed to them in any media release should be approached for approval of their quote (if drafted by the Communications Officer).

6.3 Preparation and approval of Town Council media releases is a priority for Officers and Members. Where possible, media releases should be drafted and circulated for approval in advance of a newsworthy event, activity or committee meeting.

6.4 News stories and announcements are often time-sensitive, with many needing to be sent out promptly to meet media deadlines. In these instances, if the Communications Officer has attempted contacting any Member quoted in and/or who is Chair of the Committee relevant to the subject nature of the media release for approval, but a response hasn't been received, the quote will be

attributed to the Town Clerk and the media release will be issued to the media as approved without further delay.

7 Media Releases: Elections

- 7.1 In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (purdah), the Town Council is subject to rules which impact on how it can communicate with the public. Prior to local elections, media releases will not contain a quote from any Member. In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant Officer may be quoted. Once a general election is declared a comparable embargo applies.
- 7.2 During an election period, Town Council media releases should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual members or groups of members. This ensures that no individual Member gains an unfair advantage by appearing in official publicity.

8 Media Releases: Distribution

- 8.1 Media releases will be transmitted either by email to the relevant media outlets or submitted by other means online after approval.
- 8.2 Media releases will also be posted on the Town Council website and social media pages as early as possible after transmission to the media.
- 8.3 Members with certain responsibilities for or interest in subject areas may be canvassed annually or on a pre-determined regular basis for their requirements in respect of the public communications (media releases) they wish to receive as a matter of routine.

9 Accuracy and Negative Issues

- 9.1 From time to time, the Town Council will need to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully to limit the potential for unconstructive, harmful or negative publicity. Members and Officers must alert the Corporate Services Manager or Town 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.
- 9.2 Officers will work together with Members to prepare holding statements, media releases or other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Town Council about an issue.
- 9.3 Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Town Council or its services, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the Town Clerk or Corporate Services Manager to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a personal letter to the editor(s), media release, discussion with the relevant journalist or - in mitigating circumstances - legal advice.

9.4 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 counter-productive to object or make a complaint. Each case must of course be judged individually.

9.5 Occasionally the Town Council will make errors and get something wrong. In such cases, damage limitation is important.

10 Information Embargoes

10.1 Embargoed media releases are issued when the Town Council doesn't want the details published before a particular event or time. This can be done by simply including the word 'Embargo' at the top of the media release and the inclusion of the phrase "Not for publication prior to XX/XX/XXXX [date]." Generally, most journalists and media representatives will respect this - unless a request is considered unreasonable.

11 Media Attendance at Council Meetings

11.1 The media is permitted to attend Full Council and Committee meetings and record the proceedings (via written, audio or audio-visual methods). However, as stated in the Council's Standing Orders, the media may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion.

12 Social Media Statement of Purpose

12.1 This protocol aims to establish the principles of use of social media by Town Council Members, Officers and representatives of the Town Council.

13 Social Media Principles

13.1 '*Social media*' is the term commonly given to websites and online platforms which allow users to interact with each other in some way - that is, by sharing information, opinions, activities and interests. Examples of social media websites include social networking platforms (e.g. Facebook), micro-blogging platforms (e.g. X), professional networking websites (e.g. LinkedIn), photo sharing websites (e.g. Instagram) and video sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube and TikTok).

13.2 The format and levels of interaction of social media vary greatly from one to another. Whenever Town Council representatives use such websites, they should familiarise themselves with the guidance that is set out in this protocol.

13.3 It is important that social media websites are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that their use does not expose the Town Council to security risks or reputational damage. Social media offers great potential for building relationships and improving the communication of services and facilities that the Town Council provides.

13.4 This protocol will clearly set out how social media can be managed effectively and how any risks or pitfalls can be avoided or mitigated.

14 Social Media Objectives

14.1 Social media platforms can be used by the Town Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve engagement from the local community and attract publicity. The aim of this protocol is to ensure:

- Engagement with residents and community groups and promotion of Town Council-based services, facilities, events and activities through the use of social media.
- A consistent approach is established and maintained in the use of social media platforms.
- That the Town Council's reputation is upheld and enhanced rather than adversely affected.
- That communication by use of social media is timely, appropriate, useful and engages with the local community.

14.2 Social media activity should not be the sole means of communication of Town Council services, facilities, activities and events, but a means to effectively be implemented as part of the general communications mix, which includes the issuing of media releases, website news articles, newsletter content, advertising promotion and other forms of publicity material. Any planned and approved campaigns or activities can be further enhanced by using of social media platforms, to increase reach and exposure.

15 Social Media Accounts

15.1 Currently, the Town Council uses the following social media websites to communicate its services, facilities, activities, meetings and events:

- Facebook (individual pages for Hailsham Town Council, Hailsham Youth Service and Hailsham Street Market)
- X (individual pages for Hailsham Town Council and Hailsham Youth Service)
- Instagram (individual pages for Hailsham Town Council and Hailsham Youth Service)

The Council may look to expand its use of social media platforms in the future.

16 Social Media Uses

16.1 Social media platforms may be used to:

- Distribute Town Council and committee meeting agendas.
- Promote Town Council services and facilities.
- Advertise Town Council activities and events.
- Publish good news stories which are of interest to the local community.
- Promote any staff or member vacancies.
- Publicise public consultation documents and/or engagement events.
- Promote the activities of the Town Mayor and mayoral engagements.
- Share or re-post information from partner agencies such as local authorities and emergency services.
- Post or share information from local community groups and voluntary organisations.
- Refer resident enquiries to the Town Clerk or relevant Officer or Member where required.

17 Social Media Policy

17.1 Guidance for Officers on the use of Town Council social media platforms:

17.1.1 Officers should be familiar with the terms of use on third party websites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram and X) and adhere to these at all times.

17.1.2 No information should be published on social media that is not already known to be in the public domain, i.e. available to view on the Town Council's website, contained in public minutes of meetings, stated in Town Council publicised policies and procedures, publicly available on third party websites or hard copy published material, or approved by the Town Clerk or Corporate Services Manager.

17.1.3 Information that is published on social media should be factual and fair.

17.1.4 Do not publish anything on social media that would be regarded in the workplace as unacceptable.

17.1.5 Officers using Town Council social media accounts should bear in mind that they will be seen as ambassadors for the Town Council and should always act in a responsible and socially aware manner.

17.1 Guidance for Members on the use of Town Council social media platforms:

17.1.1 Generally, comments posted by members on HTC social media are individually expressed. It is understood unless stated otherwise that members are commenting individually and not as a Councillor.

17.1.2 In all cases, at such times where members contribute to discussion on social media posts issued by the Town Council, or where Members use their personal social media accounts in their official capacity as a councillor, Members should always be mindful of the principles applicable to holding public office – integrity, objectivity, accountability, professionalism, honesty and openness.

When representing the Town Council on social media, Members should:

17.1.3 Be vigilant and look out for defamatory, discriminatory, abusive or obscene posts or comments from others on the Town Council's social media platforms and report them immediately to the Town Clerk, Corporate Services Manager or Media Officer.

17.1.4 Be aware that, because of Members's public profile as a Town Council member, Members could be regarded as acting in an official capacity when they post any content on Town Council social media platforms or personal social media accounts. Therefore, Members should ensure that any comments posted on behalf of the Town Council are appropriate and information in such comments or posts is correct.

17.1.5 Be careful if making points which could be deemed 'political' on Town Council social media platforms or personal social media accounts, and avoid being specific or personal about individuals, including other Town Council members.

When representing the Town Council on social media, Members should not:

- 17.1.6 Bring the Town Council into disrepute.
- 17.1.7 Reveal any confidential or potentially sensitive information about the Town Council that Members may have accessed in their capacity as a councillor.
- 17.1.8 Include contact details or photographs of service users or Town Council officers without written consent.
- 17.1.9 Post offensive comments about the Town Council or its Members and Officers, in addition to colleagues, representatives of partner agencies or members of the public.
- 17.1.10 Upload, publish or forward links on the Town Council's social media platforms to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, derogatory or defamatory content. Any Council Member or Officer who feel that they have been intimidated, bullied or harassed, or are offended by material posted or uploaded should inform the Town Clerk or Corporate Services Manager immediately.
- 17.1.11 Escalate heated discussions and should, alternatively, attempt to be conciliatory, respectful and state facts to calm the situation and correct any misrepresentations.
- 17.1.12 Discuss colleagues without their prior approval.
- 17.1.13 Discuss topics that may be inflammatory, e.g. politics and religion. Town Council members should be mindful that, although it is acceptable to make political points or canvass votes via Town Council Members' personal social media accounts, this will not be permissible if commenting on behalf of the Town Council.

18 Rules & Guidance for public

18.1 The Town Council has published rules and guidance for members of the public using the Town Council's social media platforms (see appendix 1). The rules and guidance are available to view on the Town Council website and 'About' information section on its Facebook page, and are as follows:

18.1.1 Replying and responding to messages and comments:

- 18.2.2 The Town Council social media accounts are generally monitored during office hours (9am-4pm, Monday to Friday), except on public holidays.
- 18.2.3 If a query from a member of the public is urgent or involves personal details, they will be asked to contact the Town Council using an alternative method.
- 18.2.4 The Town Council will endeavour to answer simple queries as quickly as possible on social media. However, if the matter of concern is intricate or requires a detailed response, members of the public may be directed to a relevant officer or department to discuss the matter further or asked to submit a Freedom of Information request.
- 18.2.5 The Town Council's aim is to respond to as many questions on their social media posts as we can, but this is not always possible and sometimes things can be missed.
- 18.2.6 Members of the public are free to talk to their local councillor about local matters too.

18.3 *Moderation and behaviour:*

- 18.3.3 The Town Council will *not* tolerate offensive or abusive language or images on their social media channels and will remove any such comments or images.
- 18.3.4 Members of the public are asked to refrain from posting any comments that are unlawful, libellous, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually explicit or discriminatory in any way. The Town Council will remove any statement or comment that they consider could be fall into any of the above categories and may report them to the relevant platform administrators.
- 18.3.5 Members of the public are asked not to 'troll', i.e. create conflict on the Town Council social media sites by posting comments or statements that are particularly controversial or inflammatory, extraneous or off-topic, with the intent of provoking a response from other social media users or disrupting normal, on-topic discussion. Any such comments may be removed.
- 18.3.6 Members of the public are asked not to bully, harass or intimidate any individual or organisation using the Town Council social media platforms.
- 18.3.7 Members of the public are asked *not* to post content copied from elsewhere without consent from the original author, i.e. content for which you do not own the copyright.
- 18.3.8 Members of the public are asked not to post the same comment, message or statement (or very similar messages) repeatedly on Town Council social media platforms. Any such comments may be removed.
- 18.3.9 Members of the public are asked not to advertise products or services on Town Council social media platforms. Any such advertisements will be removed.

18.4 Blocking and breach of rules:

- If the Town Council block a member of the public's account from one or more of the Town Council's social media platforms, this will be because the member of the public have breached the Town Council rules and guidelines concerning appropriate commenting, or the member of the public has followed or liked the Town Council's social media platforms solely to promote products or services.

18.5 *Post Sharing:*

- 18.5.1 The Town Council endeavours to share or re-post information that we think will be of relevance or interest to their followers, or of use to people, businesses and organisations in the Hailsham area. However, members of the public are asked not to be offended if the Town Council does not share or re-post something a member of the public has asked the Town Council to.
- 18.5.2 While the Town Council may like or follow an individual or organisation and re-post or share their posts/information, it does not mean that the Town Council endorses them.

19 Implementation of protocol

- 19.1 The Town Council has overall responsibility for the effective operation of its Social Media Protocol.
- 19.2 The Corporate Services Manager is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the operation of this policy and making recommendations for amendments and updates, to minimise risks to the operation of the Town Council.
- 19.3 All Council Members and Officers should ensure that they take the time to read and understand this policy. Any violation of this policy or questions regarding its content or application should be directed to the Corporate Services Manager.

Appendix 1 Guidance Notes & Rules for the Public: All Social Media Platforms

1. Replying and responding to messages and comments:

- 1.1 All Social Media platforms are generally monitored during office hours (9am-4pm, Monday to Friday), except on public holidays.
- 1.2 If your query is urgent or involves personal details, please contact us direct by calling 01323 841702 during office hours.
- 1.3 We will endeavour to answer simple queries as quickly as possible via Facebook or Instagram. However, if the matter of concern is intricate or requires a detailed response, you may be directed to a relevant officer or department to discuss the matter further.
- 1.4 Our aim is to respond to questions on all Social Media platforms posts as soon as we can, but this is not always possible and sometimes we can miss such comments.
- 1.5 Please feel free to talk to your local councillor about local matters too. Contact details for individual ward councillors can be found on our website: www.hailsham-tc.gov.uk

2. Moderation and behaviour:

- 2.1 We will *not* tolerate offensive or abusive language or images on our Social Media platforms and will remove any such comments or images.
- 2.2 *Do not* post any comments on our posts that are unlawful, libellous, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually explicit or discriminatory in any way. We will remove any statement/comment that we consider could be fall into any of the above categories and may report them to the Meta platform administrators.
- 2.3 *Do not* 'troll', i.e. create conflict on our Social Media platforms by posting comments or statements that are particularly controversial or inflammatory, extraneous or off-topic, with the intent of provoking a response from other social media users or disrupting normal, on-topic discussion. Any such comments may be removed.
- 2.4 *Do not* bully, harass or intimidate any individual or organisation using our Social Media platforms .
- 2.5 *Do not* post content copied from elsewhere without consent from the original author, i.e. content for which you do not own the copyright.
- 2.6 *Do not* post the same comment, message or statement (or very similar messages) repeatedly. Any such comments may be removed.
- 2.7 *Do not* advertise products or services on our Social Media platforms. Any such advertisements will be removed.

3. Blocking and unfollowing:

- 3.1 If we block your account from accessing our Social Media platforms, this will be because you have been deemed to breach our rules and guidelines concerning appropriate commenting, or you have followed or liked our Social Media platforms solely to promote products or services.

4. Sharing of information:

- 4.1 We try our best to share information that we think will be of relevance or interest to our followers, or of use to people, businesses and organisations in the Hailsham area. However, please do not be offended if we do not share something you ask us to.
- 4.2 Please remember that, while we may like or follow an individual or organisation and share their posts/information, it does not mean that we endorse them.