



GILLINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL

The Town Hall, School Road, Gillingham, Dorset SP8 4QR

Communications and Media Policy

August 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** Gillingham Town Council (“the Council”) is committed to the provision of accurate information about its governance, decisions and activities. Where this information is not available via the Council’s publication scheme, please contact the Town Clerk or, in their absence, the Assistant Town Clerk.
- 1.2** The Council shall, where possible, co-operate with those whose work involves gathering material for publication in any form including use of the internet (“the media”).
- 1.3** This policy explains how the Council may work with the media to meet the above objectives in accordance with the legal requirements and restrictions that apply.

2. LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AND RESTRICTIONS

- 2.1** 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 via the Council’s publication scheme.
- 2.2** 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 via the Council’s publication scheme.

3. MEETINGS

- 3.1** A meeting of the Council and its committees is open to the public, unless the meeting resolves to exclude them because their presence at the meeting is prejudicial to the public interest due to the confidential nature of the business or other special reason(s) stated in the resolution. In accordance with the Council's Standing Orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting of the Council and its committees if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.
- 3.2** Where a meeting of the Council and its committees include an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Council's Standing Orders.
- 3.3** The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a meeting of the Council and its committees (which includes e.g. using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV/radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums, or social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) which enable a person not at the meeting to see, hear or be given commentary about the meeting is permitted unless (i) the meeting has resolved to hold all or part of the meeting without the public present or (ii) such activities disrupt the proceedings or (iii) paragraphs 9 and 10 below apply.
- 3.4** The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a child or vulnerable adult at a Council or committee meeting is not permitted unless an adult responsible for them has given written permission.
- 3.5** Oral reporting or commentary about a council or committee meeting by a person who is present at the meeting is not permitted during the meeting.
- 3.6** The Council shall, as far as it is practicable, provide reasonable facilities for anyone taking a report of a Council or committee meeting and for telephoning their report at their own expense.

4. COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE MEDIA

- 4.1** This policy does not seek to regulate councillors in their private capacity.
- 4.2** The Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Council. If the views of councillors are different to the Council's corporate position and views, they will make this clear.
- 4.3** The Mayor, Town Clerk or, in their absence, the Assistant Town Clerk may contact the media if the Council wants to provide a press release, information, a statement or other material about the Council.
- 4.4** 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 an issue. It is the responsibility of all officers and councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

- 4.5** All press releases are to be factual, non-political, not written to cause offence and issued in accordance with Council policy.
- 4.6** Subject to the obligations on councillors not to disclose information referred to in paragraph 4.5 above and not to misrepresent the Council's position, councillors may communicate their position and views.
- 4.7** Officers and Councillors 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
- 4.8** It is illegal to use graphics or photographs without permission. Ensure that anyone giving permission to use an image is the original copyright owner and check the licensing agreement of photographs in any existing archives before use. Do not take or use any photographs of children who appear to be under the age of 18 without written permission from a parent or guardian. Permission is non-transferable from a third party, such as a school.
- 4.9** At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

5. ELECTIONS

- 5.1** The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Councillors and for publicity around elections. The Code makes it clear that Council resources should not be used on publicising individual councillors unless it is relevant to the position they hold in the Council.

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity can be viewed via the link below:

[Recommended code of practice for local authority publicity - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

- 5.2** In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether they are standing for election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the Council. In this situation, councillors holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

6. SOCIAL MEDIA

- 6.1** The definition of social media continues to evolve as platforms and technologies develop. Overall, it refers to any web-based practices which can be used to share content. This policy applies to the use of all social media by any Councillors and employees of Gillingham Town Council.
- 6.2** Social Media is a key communications tool for the Town Council and highlights a commitment to openness and transparency.

- 6.3** The Town Clerk, with appropriate support, is designated as the administrator of the Town Council's social media channels.
- 6.4** As a general rule, any postings on the Council's social media channels should only reflect information of content which it would be acceptable to publish to the public in other Council communications.
- 6.5** The Town Council is under no obligation to moderate posts or comments made by the public on its social media channels. However, the Council would not want to be seen to be endorsing comments which are defamatory, false or misleading; insulting, threatening or abusive; obscene or of a sexual nature; offensive, racist, sexist, homophobic or discriminatory against religions or other groups; promoting illegal activity; or intended to deceive. Such posts to Gillingham Town Council Social Media pages will be removed.
- 6.6** Occasional negative posts cannot be avoided but how they are dealt with has implications for the Town Council's reputation. They should not be ignored, although sometimes no answer is required if it is a rhetorical question, a repetition of an earlier posting, or a post designed to provoke.
- 6.7** As posts are public it is better to answer them in public, although occasionally it may help to take them onto a private channel.
- 6.8** Whilst the private accounts of employees and Councillors are their own business, it is still possible for the content posted on them to affect their professional standing and/or that of the Council. To mitigate this risk, Councillors / Officers may not include any reference to, or post comments about, the Council, job roles, colleagues or partner organisations. If, however, references to your employment or connection with the Council are made on a personal social media profile, please ensure the following actions:
- Declare somewhere on your page or biography that the views expressed are yours alone. You may wish to use the following words: 'This is my personal page and is not continuously monitored. All views are my own personal views.'
 - Do not bring the authority into disrepute.
 - Do not reveal any potentially confidential or sensitive information about the Council that you may have come across in your work or role for the Council.
 - Do not use any Council-owned images or logos.
 - Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or staff.
 - Do not make offensive comments about the Council, councillors, officers, colleagues or members of the public, as this is a disciplinary offence.

7. DOCUMENT REVIEW

This document was approved and adopted at the Finance and Policy Committee on Monday 21st August 2023, minute no. 573 b) and ratified by Full Council on 29th August 2023.

Policy reviews will be carried out biennially or when there are changes to current legislation, whichever is the sooner.

8. REFERENCES

Relevant legislation: Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, Data Protection Act 2018. Website: [Data Protection Act 2018 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

Guide to the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) is available from the Information Commission's Office (ICO). Website: [Guide to the UK General Data Protection Regulation \(UK GDPR\) | ICO](#)

Signed by:

The Mayor of Gillingham: _____ Date: _____

Local Government Association

Social Media - Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- Talk to residents, staff and others. And do answer their questions (quickly and honestly).
- Trust your teams and staff to use social media.
- Be responsible always.
- Be respectful always.
- Innovate – different approaches work for different people.
- Have a personality – corporate speak or just issuing press releases won't work well on social media.
- Share other people's helpful content and links.
- Credit other people's work, ideas and links.
- Listen (social media is designed to be a two-way channel, just like any good conversation).
- Ask your own questions. Seek feedback from your residents (but make sure you share the results with them).
- Have a rota where appropriate – share the load and you'll get more from your accounts.
- Adhere to your existing HR policies – you don't need a separate HR policy especially for social media.
- And more than anything, do use social media in the spirit in which it was intended – to engage, openly and honestly.

Don't:

- Broadcast or talk at people. Your residents will soon spot broadcasts and respond accordingly.
- Block social media – social media is not a risk, blocking its use is a risk.
- Try to cover up mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run.
- Build accounts and just hope people will come – sometimes it is best to go to the places where your audiences are already having conversations.
- Assume that social media will look after itself – you will need to invest time, enthusiasm and energy to make it work. And don't leave your accounts unattended for long spells.
- Post content which will embarrass your council or yourself.
- Ignore legal advice, it's there to help you.
- Think that a disclaimer in your biography will save you from potential legal action, it won't.
- Expect your staff to make do with old technology which can be a barrier to effective working.
- Share your passwords with anyone other than your communications leads.
- Forget that social media is 24/7 – just because you leave at 5.00 pm doesn't mean the world stops or that residents won't be active. If your account is only staffed 9-5 then you should say so on your profile.