

Ongar Town Council Communications and Social Media policy.

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to the Town Councillors in their communications with the public. It refers to communications with the press and public and all online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet.

The Policy covers all forms of communication via letter, email or press publication as well as social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Town council website
- Facebook, Instagram, and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites.
- LinkedIn
- Blogs and discussion forums
- Town Council Emails.
- Local print media and newspapers

The principles of the Policy apply to Councillors and to the Clerk to the Council. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Town Council. The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration.

The use of social media is not to replace existing forms of communication. The Town Council website will remain the main media for the purpose of communicating information about the Town Council. Facebook and other forms of social media will be used to enhance communication. Therefore, existing means of communication should continue with social media being an additional option.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative, and accurate. What you write on the web is permanent.

In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using their websites for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters.

Town Council Social Media Policy.

The Council has appointed Everything Epping Forest as their press agent, but the Clerk and the Chairman will be the moderators. The moderators will be responsible for monitoring the content, ensuring that it complies with the social media policy and reflects the Council's agreed position. The moderators will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory, libellous nature. Such posts will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e., Facebook) and the Council.

The Council will appoint a nominated webmaster to maintain and update the Town Council website.

The website may be used to:

- Post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Post good news stories with linked website or press page
- Announce vacancies
- Retweet or 'share' information from partners i.e., police, library, NHS etc.
- Announce/publicise new information
- Post or share information from other Town related community groups/ clubs/ associations/ bodies etc – for example, schools, sports clubs, and community groups.
- Refer resident queries to the Clerk and all other councillors

Facebook or Twitter will be used to support the website information above.

Emails will be used to distribute information on Council business to councillors and outside bodies. Councillors are reminded to be sure they have permission to use their work email address for council business and be aware of the risk that council emails, containing important information, may get missed among work emails.

Councillors are asked to limit their email output to essential information only and have regard to the impact email use has on the environment. "Thank you" or "Well done" should be avoided. Use of bcc will also limit the number of unnecessary emails going to staff inboxes.

Councillors and communication with the public

Individual Town Councillors cannot speak for the council unless explicitly authorised by a resolution made in council. Councillors should be clear in their communications whether they are making contact in their official councillor role or in a private capacity. Councillors may speak as individuals, but care must be taken to ensure that a reasonable person could not assume that they are speaking on behalf of the Council. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their personal e-mail address which should not be used for council business with the outside world. Councillors must not state or claim a point of view that does not reflect the Town Council's agreed position and may lead to negative publicity.

Code of Practice

Guidance when using social media (including email)

All social media sites in use should be checked and updated on a regular basis and ensure that the security settings are in place.

When participating in any communication -

- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief, and transparent.
- Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Town Council. Never make false or misleading statements.
- Town Councillors should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment.
- All Town Councillors need to be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council, ~~or~~ bring the Council into disrepute, or is contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct or any other Policies.
- Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud." Use sentence case format. Do not use capital letters or write in red to emphasise points.
- Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or beliefs should not be published on any social media site.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights, and hostile communications.
- Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
- Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the person or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
- Respect the privacy of other Councillors and residents.
- Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, see below libel and copyright.
- Spell and grammar check everything
- Correct any errors promptly

The moderator will remove any negative posts which may contain personal and inflammatory remarks, libellous or defamatory information without further comment or notification.

Responding to communications

Residents and councillors should note that not all communications require a response.

If a councillor sees a media article, published letter or social media item, and thinks a response may be needed, they should inform the Town Clerk who will consider the following before assessing whether a response would be appropriate, and then be responsible for the response:

- Is the item in question factually accurate?
- Is the item expressing a personal view, and if so, is that clearly stated?
- Would further discussion on the subject be constructive?

It should be noted that:

- There will not be an immediate response to communications as they may be discussed by the Town Council and all responses will be agreed by the Town Council.
- The Town Clerk will be responsible for all final published responses.
- If a matter needs further consideration, it may be raised at either the open forum or as a full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of Councillors. If on a social media page, the poster shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case.
- If the Clerk feels unable to answer a communication, for example of a contentious nature, this shall be referred to the Council, or if an urgent response is required, the Clerk will confer with the Chairman before responding. The individual will be informed by way of response to this fact.

As stated above, some communication from residents and other third parties may be required to be discussed at a Town 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.

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

The policy will be reviewed annually.