



Chard Town Council

COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLIC RELATIONS ('PR') POLICY

1. Introduction

Chard Town Council ('the Council') has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders and to do this it is vital that a communications and public relations policy is in place.

- 1.1. This policy should be read in conjunction with the Council's Standing Orders and Code of Conduct. The Standing Order 22 states:

'Requests from the press or other media for an oral or written comment or statement from the Council, its councillors or staff shall be handled in accordance with the Council's policy in respect of dealing with the press and/or other media.'

- 1.2. The Council recognises its responsibility to help communicate accurate and timely information to the media and public in a professional manner. Proper cooperation will ensure that messages issued by the Council are consistent and accurate.
- 1.3. The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved by effective two-way communication. The overall aim is the Council communications should be a two-way process:
 - 1.3.1. To give people the information to understand accurately what the Council does, so they make informed decisions; and,
 - 1.3.2. To get information for residents and stakeholders so that the Council can understand their needs.
- 1.4. The purpose of the Council's Communications and PR Policy is to ensure its members and staff communicate information effectively to promote the openness and transparency of the Council.
- 1.5. The Council also recognises the distinction between communication from the Council, and communication from individuals as councillors.
- 1.6. The communication of information may be viewed in four main mediums; print, electronic, media relations and public relations. However, communication with the

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- 1.7. media and public takes place every day on a very basic level e.g. telephone enquiries, social media enquiries, speaking to residents in the street.
- 1.8. The Council respects freedom of speech and this policy is not intended to restrain this.
- 1.9. Local councils and their representatives are governed by national legislation and codes of practice. The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. Communications activity must adhere to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011. This code is statutory guidance and therefore councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.
- 1.10. The Publicity Code referred to in 1.8 states that publicity by local authorities should:
 - 1.10.1. Be lawful
 - 1.10.2. Be cost effective
 - 1.10.3. Be objective
 - 1.10.4. Be even-handed
 - 1.10.5. Be appropriate
 - 1.10.6. Have regard to equality and diversity
 - 1.10.7. Be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

2. With whom should the Council be communicating?

The Council's audiences are wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents
- Council staff
- Hard to reach groups, such as young people
- The district, county and unitary authorities
- Voluntary groups and organisations
- The business community
- Other public sector organisations
- Visitors and those who work in the parish

3. The Council's communication vision and aims

The Council's vision for its communications is that residents will:

- Know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect;
- Feel confident and satisfied with the services and their costs; and
- Understand how to get involved with, or influence, the work of the Council.

In addition, visitors to the Town will:

- See Chard as a thriving destination in which to live, work and undertake leisure activities

The Council's aims for its communications will:

- Raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence levels

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- Raise awareness of services provided by the Council
- Raise the profile of Chard as a town
- Support elected members in their role as community leaders
- Make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people
- Proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the image or integrity of the Council

4. Handling general requests

- 4.1. All staff and councillors are responsible for communicating basic and routine information to the Press and public in relation to their specific job duties or role within the Council and its committees.
- 4.2. Requests for information outside the remit of an individual's responsibilities should be directed to the appropriate person within the Council for a response.

5. Responding to media enquiries

- 5.1. The 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.
- 5.2. The media are critically important in conveying information to the community, so the Council, must maintain positive, constructive media relations at all times.
- 5.3. The media work on behalf of the local community to hold the Council to account for its policies and actions, and it is therefore important that they have access to the officers and members in order to provide them with background information to help them in this role.
- 5.4. Requests for interviews, information or photographs from the media should be referred initially to the Town Clerk, or in their absence to the Mayor.
- 5.5. Any responses will be collated in conjunction with the Town Clerk. Where possible, responses will be given by the Mayor, or in their absence the Deputy Mayor and then the relevant Committee Chairperson.
- 5.6. Official statements from the Town Council must be issued on a document bearing the Council's logo, include an appropriate title, be dated and contain the details of the person to contact for further information.
- 5.7. Statements made must reflect the minuted opinion of the Council, where applicable.
- 5.8. Councillors may be approached directly by the media and can provide responses, making it clear that the views given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council. Members should not claim to be commenting as an elected Councillor or on

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behalf of the Council.

- 5.9. The Council recognises that councillors have private lives and may be approached by the media in relation to their roles outside the Council. In this instance, members must make it clear that they are not commenting as an elected councillor or on behalf of the Council.
- 5.10. Requests to take photographs of Councillors or staff in relation to the Council business must be agreed by the individual and in the case of staff, by their line manager.
- 5.11. There is no out-of-hours media service, although councillors can be contacted outside normal office hours as some have their contact details in the public domain. In extreme circumstances, for example if the circumstances of the request will have an impact before the timescale allowed by the next working day, the Mayor and the Town Clerk should be contacted to liaise with the media if necessary.
- 5.12. The Council should not pass comment on anonymous allegations or allegations about individual councillors or staff.
- 5.13. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific query.
- 5.14. Members and staff must alert the Town Clerk as soon as a potentially positive or negative issue which may attract media interest becomes known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

6. Issuing news releases

- 6.1. As well as responding to media requests, the Council will pro-actively issue news releases and distribute them to the relevant media.
- 6.2. Press releases must be issued on a document bearing the Council's logo, including an appropriate title, be dated and contain the details of the person to contact for further information.
- 6.3. Press releases will include a quote from a relevant Councillor, wherever possible.
- 6.4. Press releases will not publicise the activities of any individual councillor or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.
- 6.5. Photographs may be issued with press releases and captions should be included in the release. If photographs include councillors or staff clause 5.10 will apply.
- 6.6. Press releases will be sent by email to relevant media, displayed on the Council's website, on the Council's noticeboards and on the Council's social media sites.

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- 6.7. The Town Clerk is responsible for developing press releases in conjunction with the relevant councillor.
- 6.8. Letters to the editor of a newspaper do not qualify as press releases and caution is advised when submitting a letter of this kind. If submitted by a councillor, it should state that they are acting as an individual and not as a councillor. It may be appropriate for the Council to submit a letter on occasions, such as correcting factual inaccuracies. These letters should be factual, brief and signed by the Mayor or the Town Clerk only.
- 6.9. Other ways to correct inaccurate reporting about the Council include issuing a separate press release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. Any such action should be agreed in advance with the Town Clerk and/or the Mayor.
- 6.10. Officers and members have responsibility to identify newsworthy items and seek opportunities where it may be beneficial to issue a press release.

7. Media attendance at Council meetings

- 7.1. Local media will be provided upon request with agendas, reports and minutes of meetings, prior to them taking place, as required by the Local Government Act 1972.
- 7.2. The press will be provided with reasonable facilities i.e. seating, etc, at a meeting or part of a meeting at which they are entitled to present, as outlined in Standing Order 3.n.
- 7.3. Photographing, recording, broadcasting or transmitting the proceedings of meetings by the media is outlined in Standing Order 3.l and 3.m.
- 7.4. The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. During meetings Councillors and staff should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the media an accurate picture, rather than relying on the media interpretation of what can be a complex issue or report.

8. Managing Negative Issues

- 8.1. 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.
- 8.2. Councillors and staff must alert the 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.
- 8.3. Councillors and staff will work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

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9. Town Council website

- 9.1. The Council's website www.chard.gov.uk should provide an informative online resource for residents and visitors, giving information about the Council, the town, councillors and staff, services provided by the Council, dates of meetings, the local community, news, links to useful websites, minutes and agendas and a search facility.
- 9.2. Information on the website should be accurate and up to date.
- 9.3. Press releases and Council notices should be displayed in the news section of the website.

10. Council noticeboards

- 10.1. Priority is given on the Council's noticeboards to official Council documents, such as agenda, public notices, election information and legal issues affecting the Council.
- 10.2. Where possible, the Council will display posters and information for community related issues.

11. Consultation

- 11.1. The Council is committed to consulting local taxpayers, service users, local businesses and its own staff and members to identify ways in which it can improve services.
- 11.2. Consultation is a key part of a communications strategy as it is a two-way exchange of views between local people and the Council. This will help the Council make decisions and advise people about why it provides the services in the way that it does.
- 11.3. To date and currently, most of the Council's consultation is by way of questionnaires, public meetings, public exhibitions and members' interaction with the public. However, occasional surveys could be carried out via social media, such as Facebook.

12. Publicity in election periods

- 12.1. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, the Council is subject to rules which impact on how it can communicate with the public.
- 12.2. During this period, Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way which identifies them with individual members or groups of members. This ensures that no individual councillor gains an unfair advantage by appearing in official publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant member of staff may be quoted in accordance with the guidelines in this policy.

13. Digital and social media

- 13.1. The use of digital and social media and electronic communications provides the Council with the opportunity to communicate with people immediately, in real time and in a manner which improves further communication between the Council and residents, businesses and organisations it works with and serves.
- 13.2. The Council has a website, Facebook page and uses email to communicate with residents and others. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications.
- 13.3. The Council's Facebook page aims to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities with the Town and promote the community in a positive way. All Councillors and staff must have this aim in mind when posting information.

14. Non-Council Related Media Activity

- 14.1. Councillors and staff 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 media concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.