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COMMUNICATION POLICY

1 Introduction and Purpose

1.1 This policy sets out the Council's approach to managing all communications, including:

- Public Relations
- Social Media

2 General Communication

2.1 Correspondence

2.1.1 The point of contact for the Council is the Clerk and all correspondence for the Community Council should be addressed to the Clerk.

2.1.2 The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.

2.1.3 No individual Councillor or Officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Council, a committee, a sub-committee or a working party. Councillors and Officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.

2.1.4 All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council using official letterheaded paper.

2.1.5 Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

2.1.6 The Clerk (and staff) has/have the right not to respond to malicious or vexatious correspondence, whether by phone, email or post. Such communications will be reported to the Establishment Committee.

2.2 Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Groups

2.2.1 The agenda should be clear and concise. It should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision, and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.

2.2.2 Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.

2.2.3 Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes other Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

2.2.4 Confidential items will be printed on pink paper, and Councillors are to leave these papers in the Chamber at the end of each meeting for shredding.

2.3 Communications with the Press and Public

2.3.1 The Clerk will clear all press reports or comments to the media with the relevant committee chair as appropriate.

2.3.2 Press reports from the Council, its committees or working parties should be from the Clerk or via the reporter's attendance at a meeting.

2.3.3 Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, Councillors who are asked for comments by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be reported as their personal view.

2.3.4 Unless a Councillor is certain that they are reporting a decision of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.

2.3.5 If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure, or via a Council agenda item.

2.3.6 As per the Council's social media policy, political and vexatious posts on social media will not be responded to by staff, except with instructions to email the Clerk.

2.4 Councillor Correspondence to External Parties

2.4.1 Individual Councillors are responsible for their ward member correspondence. The Community Council does not provide a secretariat for such purpose. Councillors must ensure they make clear where they are informing on official policy and where they are stating their personal views.

2.4.2 A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and it should be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

2.5 Communications with Community Council Staff

2.5.1 Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the Council).

2.5.2 No individual Councillor, regardless of whether they are the Chair of the Council or a Committee Chair, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated powers.

2.5.3 Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Community Council.

2.5.4 Instant replies should not be expected to emails to the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated.

2.5.5 Councillors should acknowledge their emails when requested to do so.

2.5.6 For meetings with the Clerk or other officers an appointment should be made, wherever possible, meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular officer and Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate Council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.

3 Public Relations

3.1 Press and Media

3.3.1 This section of the policy does not seek to be either prescriptive or comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with the press and media.

3.3.2 Above everything else, Councillors must observe the Council's Code of Conduct whenever they conduct the business of the authority, conduct the business of the office to which they have been elected/appointed or act as a representative of the authority.

3.2 Clerk and Officers of the Council

3.2.1 The Clerk as the Proper Officer of the Council is authorised to receive all communications from the press and media and to issue press statements on behalf of the Council. In the absence of the Clerk, or if deemed by the Clerk to be preferable, media communications will be handled by the person who has been designated by the Council (usually at its annual meeting) to be the Council's "press officer".

3.2.2 In the absence of both the press officer and the Clerk, enquiries from the press or media will be referred to the Chair of the Council, who will act in that case as the spokesperson of the Council. All communications made by the Clerk or any other person acting on behalf of the Council will relate to the stated business and day to day management of the activities or adopted policies of the Council.

3.2.3 The Clerk is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council. Where such questions are put to the Clerk, the enquirer should be referred to the designated press officer or the Chair of the Council, as deemed appropriate. No other officer of the Council (unless authorised by the Clerk or the designated press officer or the Chair) is permitted to speak or communicate with the press and media on any matter affecting the Council or its business.

3.4 Councillors

3.4.1 A Councillor must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press or media on any matter which has been discussed in confidential session at Council or Committee meetings or at any other private briefing. A Councillor must act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the Council. Should the media wish to discuss an issue that is or may be likely to be subject to legal proceedings, then legal advice should be sought before any response is made.

3.4.2 When speaking to or providing written material to the press and media, Councillors should make clear the capacity in which they are providing the information. For example: as Chair of the Council, as a Committee Chair or as an individual member.

3.4.3 If a Councillor is speaking to the media in a private, personal capacity, they must never use the prefix “Councillor” or refer to their position on the Council. Doing so could imply they may be stating Council policy. They must make clear to the press that they are speaking in a private, personal capacity (and not speaking as a Pontypool Community Councillor). A copy of any written material sent to the press and media by a Councillor, representing the Council, must be forwarded to the Clerk.

3.4.4 Take particular care if the press or media approach you for comment on a controversial subject, and do not be led into stating something you did not really mean to say. If you are unsure about any particular policy, simply state “no comment” and ask the press to contact the Council Office.

3.4.5 Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful about expressing individual views to the press or media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business. Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure they make it clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council. Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made. Whilst it may be legitimate in some circumstances for a Councillor to state that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in an open meeting), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the press.

3.4.6 A Councillor must never raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an officer at meetings held in public or before the press. Such matters are confidential, subject to employment law and could result in legal proceedings.

3.5 Dealing with the Press verbally (eg in cases of local emergencies or events)

3.5.1 When dealing with the press verbally, members and officers should be aware of the following:

- be informed and certain of all your facts;
- ensure that when making comments on behalf of the Community Council that you are aware what Council policy is and that your comments reflect that policy;
- only discuss items that are in the public domain;
- be aware of data protection laws, ie, the Data Protection Act (2018);
- be calm and present a professional, informed image of the Council;
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- ensure that your comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or its staff into disrepute and ensure that comments are neither libellous nor slanderous.

3.6 Meetings of the Council and Committees

3.6.1 Facilities will be provided at meetings when requested for the press and media to take notes of the proceedings. The press and media are welcome to attend meetings, whether held physically or remotely, and will be sent a link to the meeting on request.

3.6.2 As provided in the Council's Standing Orders, both the press and the public may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion.

4 Social Media

4.1 Overview

4.1.1 Social media is a blanket term applied to a range of online multimedia tools that are used for creating content and enabling two-way communication. It can be accessed via your smartphone, PC, laptop, tablet or smart TV. All social media accounts are free of charge and can be set up quickly and easily from an Internet page.

4.1.2 Social media has become a powerful and helpful tool for councils, helping them engage with and inform communities, raise awareness of community issues, events or Council initiatives and seek views and receive feedback from citizens.

4.1.3 Social media also has a darker side: online abuse and online bullying ("trolling") have reached record levels and politicians/councillors are often the target of unacceptable, unpleasant and sometimes threatening online abuse, which may be criminal acts.

4.2 Decision Making

4.2.1 This policy is intended to help employees and elected members make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as social networking websites, forums, message boards, blogs or comments on web-articles, including (but not limited to) Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Tik Tok and Snapchat.

4.2.2 This policy outlines the standards the Council requires employees and elected members to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which your use of social media may be monitored and the action that may be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

4.3 Compliance

4.3.1 All employees and elected members are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the privacy, confidentiality and interests of the Council.

4.3.2 Breaches of this policy by employees will be dealt with under the Council's Disciplinary Procedures. In serious cases, they may be gross misconduct, leading to summary dismissal.

4.3.3 Breaches of this policy by elected members will be dealt with under the Code of Conduct.

4.4 Responsibility for implementation of the Policy

4.4.1 The Council has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this policy.

4.4.2 The Clerk is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the operation of this policy and making recommendations for changes to minimise risks to the Council's work.

4.4.3 All employees and elected members should ensure that they take the time to read and understand this policy. Any breach of this policy should be reported to the Clerk or the Chair of the Council.

4.4.4 Questions regarding the content or application of this policy should be directed to the Clerk.

4.5 Using social media sites in the name of the Council

4.5.1 The Council's social media sites are registered in the name of Pontypool Community Council and Pontypool Youth. The Clerk is the designated person for administration of the Council's social media sites and maintaining securely all relevant passwords.

4.5.2 In addition to the Clerk, the following persons also have access to post on and maintain the Council's social media sites:

i) staff whose work requires them to post on or maintain the Council's social media pages, in consultation with the Clerk
ii) the Chair of the Council.

4.6 Rules for Use of Social Media

4.6.1 Whenever you are permitted to use social media in accordance with this policy, you must adhere to the following general rules.

4.6.2 Make all posts as factual as possible. **Do not give opinion and only comment when necessary, e.g. "what time does the Grotto open". If a specific question is raised then the response will be "please contact the clerk@pontypoolcc.gov.uk"**

4.6.3 Do not upload, post or forward a link to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content.

4.6.4 Any employee/elected member who feels that they have been harassed, bullied or are offended by material posted or uploaded by a colleague onto a social media site should inform the Clerk/Chair.

4.6.5 Never disclose commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the Clerk/Chair.

4.6.6 Do not upload, post or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third party's consent.

4.6.7 Before you include a link to a third party website, check that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.

4.6.8 When making use of any social media platform, you must read and comply with its terms of use.

4.6.9 Be honest and open but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the Council.

4.6.10 You are personally responsible for any content you publish into social media tools.

4.6.11 Don't escalate heated discussions; try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations.

4.6.12 Do not discuss colleagues without their prior approval.

4.6.13 Always consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g. politics and religion. Remember that, although it is acceptable (for councillors) to make political points or canvass votes via your own social media accounts, this will not be permissible if you are commenting on behalf of the Council.

4.6.14 Avoid publishing your contact details where they can be accessed and used widely by people you did not intend to see them and never publish anyone else's contact details.

4.7 Monitoring use of social media websites

4.7.1 Employees and elected members should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether or not accessed for Council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against employees under our Disciplinary Procedures and councillors under the Code of Conduct.

4.7.2 Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances, constitute a criminal offence or otherwise give rise to legal liability against you and/or the Council.

4.7.3 In particular a serious case of uploading, posting or forwarding a link to any of the following types of material on a social media website, whether in a professional or personal capacity, is likely to gross misconduct/breach of the Code of Conduct (this list is not exhaustive):

a) pornographic material (that is, writing, pictures, films and video clips of a sexually explicit or arousing nature);
b) a false and defamatory statement about any person or organisation;
c) material, which is offensive, obscene, criminal, discriminatory, derogatory or may cause embarrassment to the Council, its councillors or its employees;
d) confidential information about the Council or anyone else;

e) any other statement which is likely to create any liability (whether criminal or civil, whether for you or the organisation); or
f) material in breach of copyright or other intellectual property rights, or which invades the privacy of any person.

Any such action will be addressed under the Disciplinary Procedure in respect of staff and the Code of Conduct in respect of elected members.

4.7.4 Where evidence of misuse is found, the Council may undertake a more detailed investigation involving the examination and disclosure of monitoring records to those nominated to undertake the investigation and any witnesses or managers involved in the investigation. If necessary, such information may be handed to the Police in connection with any criminal investigation.

4.7.5 If you consider that any use of social media by other employees/elected members may be in breach of this policy, please report it to the Clerk/Chair in accordance with the Council's Whistle-Blowing Policy.

4.8 Monitoring and Review

4.8.1 The Council shall be responsible for reviewing this policy on a bi-annual basis unless there are any further statutory updates to ensure that it meets legal requirements and reflects best practice.

NB: Further information for elected members, published by the Welsh Local Government Association, on the use of social media can be viewed on the One Voice Wales website