



Peacehaven Town Council

Peacehaven Town Council – Social Media & Communications Policy

Adopted by Council 16th May 2023

Revision approved by Policy & Finance Committee (blue text) 27th June 2023.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, as issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The code is statutory guidance and therefore Councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.
- 1.2 Failure to follow the Council's Media and Communications Policy could lead to a breach of the statutory code and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the council's reputation. It is important that all Councillors and Officers understand the implications of this code which this policy explains within a local context.
- 1.3 This policy should be read in conjunction with the Members' Code of Conduct.

2. Approach to publicity

- 2.1 The council welcomes enquiries from the press and media and recognizes that a good relationship with the press helps communicate effectively with residents.
- 2.2 Equally, the council recognizes that taking a proactive approach to communication ensures information is made available to residents in a timely manner, and is accessible via as many media sources as possible including emerging social media platforms.

3. Principles of communication

- 3.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity identifies key principles regarding publicity, and the council will ensure any publicity:
 - Is lawful
 - Is cost effective
 - Is objective
 - Is even-handed
 - Is appropriate
 - Has regard to equality and diversity
 - Is issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

4. Official Council press releases

- 4.1 The Council recognizes that the use of press releases is a key technique for publicizing Council activities, decisions, and achievements.

- 4.2 An official Council press release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole. In certain circumstances, it may be appropriate for a Councillor (normally the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, or committee Chairman) to draft the press release, but the Town Clerk (or other nominated Officer) will be responsible for checking and subsequently issuing any official Council press release.
- 4.3 All press releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Councillor. Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicize the activities of individual Councillors, identify a Councillor's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.
- 4.4 Press releases will be issued to local newspapers and copies will be made available on the Council's website. An edited version may be available via the Council's social media platforms, with a link to the full story available.

5. Requests for interview

- 5.1 Any request for an interview with a Councillor or Officer should be referred to the Town Clerk (or other nominated Officer) in the first instance. The Town Clerk, in liaison with the Mayor, will determine the most appropriate Councillor or Officer to be put forward for interview.
- 5.2 Where a Councillor is authorized to speak on behalf of the Council, it is their responsibility to ensure they are clear on the corporate position of the Council, and that their responses to questions accurately reflect this.
- 5.3 Where an Officer is authorized to speak on behalf of the Council, they must never give their opinion on specific Council policy and must remember their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge in support of the Council's agreed policies.
- 5.4 If a Councillor has not been specifically authorized by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, a Councillor who is asked for a comment should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as such.

6. Publicity during elections

- 6.1 There are specific rules governing publicity when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (pre-election period), all proactive publicity about candidates is halted.
- 6.2 During the pre-election period, all council publicity shall be managed by the Town Clerk (or other nominated Officer), and any quotes provided in support of press releases will be given by authorised Officers.

7. Social media

- 7.1 The Council recognizes that for some residents, accessing information via social media platforms is their preferred method. While there are too many social media sites to include all of them, the Council will endeavour to use those which are most widely used, and regularly review the type and number of social media sites used.

7.2 Peacehaven Town Council will use social media for the following purposes to:

- Communicate key messages and news in a timely way and raise awareness of services provided by Peacehaven Town Council.
- Engage and communicate with our residents, to pass on information and to collect their views, using social media to start a conversation and seek opinions.
- Advertise to specific audiences in a targeted, measurable and cost-effective way.

7.3 Social media sites will be used to support other communications issued by the Council and will help provide a consistent message across all media formats. To help achieve this, all social media releases will be approved by the Town Clerk (or other nominated Officer).

7.4 Where Officers and Councillors use social media in a professional capacity to represent the Council, the Council's corporate identity will be used and not that of any individual Councillor or Officer.

7.5 Council policy bans Council controlled personal data from being uploaded, posted or otherwise transferred to social media, instant messaging or collaboration services (including but not limited to WhatsApp, Teams, Skype, Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Slack, Google Workspace) without the authorization of The Council Chairman, Town Clerk or Deputy Town Clerk.

7.6 Any social media, instant messaging or collaboration services (including but not limited to WhatsApp, Teams, Skype, Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Slack, Google Workspace) that are set up separately by Councillors, staff or groups of Councillors/staff fall outside of the Council's data control and will remain the sole responsibility of those individuals that created them and use them. Council policy bans Council controlled personal data from being uploaded to such media.

7.7 Officers and Councillors using social media in this way must respect copyright, data protection, freedom of information and other laws, and be aware of the risks of action for defamation. Officers must not use insulting or offensive language or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in the workplace or elsewhere.

7.8 Peacehaven Town Council employees and Councillors must apply the same safeguards whilst communicating on social media as they would with any other form of communication. These safeguards are as follows:

- Any social media account set up by Peacehaven Town Council should be politically neutral in relation to content and any information which is shared.
- Do not post personal data about an individual who can be identified.
- Do not post anything that could be considered discriminatory, offensive, or illegal.
- If you are in any doubt do not post and speak to your line manager or the Town Clerk for advice.

7.9 To make sure the reputation of Peacehaven Town Council is maintained, it is the expectation that all social media accounts set up on behalf of Peacehaven Town Council will:

- Provide regular and accurate updates / posts to followers.
- Reply to messages and comments as appropriate (within 1 working day).
- Continue to engage and build audiences.
- Use PTC imagery and branding.
- Have a purpose i.e. informs /generates conversation / or call to action and provides added value to PTC or individual services within the organisation.
- Consider the timing and appropriateness of posts in relation to what is going on locally / nationally especially during times of celebration or mourning.

7.10 Negative comments on social media cannot be avoided and should be responded to unless:

- It is a rhetorical question.
- It repeats an earlier post which has already been responded to.
- When responding to negative posts please ensure you only reply once. If comments continue, offer to contact them offline to discuss in more detail.
- If you are concerned about any of your posts then please speak to your line manager or the Town Clerk for advice.

7.11 Peacehaven Town Council is not responsible for the comments posted by others on our social media accounts. We would not wish to restrict freedom of expression and generally we will not hide or remove posts. However, we will balance this approach by reporting (as a breach of The Malicious Communication Act 1988) and / or removing / hiding posts which we consider to be:

- Insulting, threatening or abusive.
- Offensive or of a sexual nature.
- Obscene content.
- Discriminatory (for example: homophobic, racist etc.).
- Illegal or promoting illegal activity.
- Deceptive or intended to deceive.

It is the responsibility of the person managing a social media account to remove any posts which breach the conditions listed above. If you have concerns or questions, then please speak to your line manager or the Town Clerk for advice.

7.12 Peacehaven Town Council will not accept payment for advertising on any of our social media platforms. We believe doing this could undermine the level of trust we want to build with residents on our social media channels.

7.13 Use of photography and video - Using images, videos, and Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs) (subject to copyright) can help tell a story, show personality, create better engagement, and is often more easily accessible than words. Peacehaven Town Council wants to embrace the most effective methods of communication; however we need to ensure this is done with consideration to the necessary permissions. If you are using photography, video or GIFs please ensure you:

- Use original images and obtain the relevant permission of anyone in the image being used.
- Use the option to share GIFs on social media and never copy and paste links.

7.14 Social media in your personal life – Peacehaven Town Council recognises that many employees and Councillors make use of social media in a personal capacity.

- Staff and Councillors must not suggest that they are representing official Council views and should explicitly state that the views posted are their own and not official views.
- Staff and Councillors must not use or display their Peacehaven Town Council corporate email address on their profile pages.
- They must not post any offensive or defamatory comments, or share information either pertaining to the Council, its members or Council staff.
- Any activity where staff and Councillors post defamatory, illegal, or offensive comments that is brought to the attention of the Council or where staff post information about Council related information when not authorised to do so, will be dealt with under disciplinary procedures.
- If your personal social media account is targeted for Peacehaven Town Council business, then please speak to your line manager or the Town Clerk for advice.

8. General guidance for Councillors and Officers

- 8.1 Councillors and Officers must ensure they do not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press or other media on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on council or committee agendas or at any other private briefing.
- 8.2 Councillors and Officers are expected to abide by their respective Code of Conduct and Handbooks, as well as the Data Protection Act 2018 in all their work on behalf of the Council.
- 8.3 As more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors and Officers are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of Council policies and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (which may also involve a criminal investigation).
- 8.4 Councillors and Officers should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed, if required. Additional information on the appropriate use of email is set out in the Email Policy Statement.
- 8.5 Councillors and Officers should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the Council.
- 8.6 Councillors should not use the prefix 'Councillor' when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating Council policy, which is not necessarily consistent with your personal opinion.
- 8.7 Any Councillor failing to follow the guidelines set out in this policy may find themselves in breach of the Members' Code of Conduct and subject to a complaint to the Monitoring Officer.
- 8.8 Any officer failing to follow the guidance set out in this policy could face disciplinary action.