

ABINGDON ON THAMES TOWN COUNCIL



COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

1. Introduction

In order to carry out its work, ensure it is representing residents and gain feedback on its activities, Abingdon Town Council Town needs to communicate with residents and a range of organisations and bodies. This policy gives a framework to help officers, councillors and consultants make decisions around communication strategies and methods. This single document is intended to replace the Communication Policy and Social Media Policy.

2. Purpose and scope

The purpose of this policy is to define aims and principles of Abingdon Town Council's communication activity. It is intended to help officers and councillors make choices about the best ways to communicate. The scope of this policy includes all employees and Councillors of the Council, including the Mayor and any consultants who are acting on behalf of the Council.

3. Legal/Policy background

3.1 *Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity*

All Council communications activity will have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The publicity code provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity. The code sets out seven key principles. Publicity should:

- Be lawful
- Be cost-effective
- Be objective
- Be even-handed
- Be appropriate
- Have regard to equality and diversity
- Be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

The full code can be found here:

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/publicitycode2011

Council employees are governed by strict rules on impartiality and publicity and are not allowed to enter into any form of communication that supports or promotes, or may be interpreted as supporting or promoting, the political views of any councillor or group of councillors. Any communications either through public statements or the media (including social media) must only support and promote council policy and not politicians or political parties.

3.2 Council Codes

This policy should also be seen together with the Code of Conduct and the Corporate Governance Policy.

3.3 Council Strategies

This policy forms part of a wider Council approach to communications.

4. Aims and Principles

In all communications activity the Town Council aims to communicate effectively with residents and other interested organisations. In its communications it will:

- Positively communicate its own work and that undertaken in its name by contractors and consultants
- Champion work by other agencies, organisations and businesses within the town
- Remain interesting and relevant
- Provide value for money

5. Detailed Policy

5.1 Choosing communications methods and channels

The Town Council will look to communicate its activities using a range of digital and traditional media. In making choices, the Council, its employees and consultants will always balance the value for money considerations with the need to reach as many residents as possible. It will consider the benefits of different channels, the reach and the timeliness of the channel.

5.2 Website

The Town Council will have an up to date easy to navigate website. The website will include access to all meeting documents as well as up to date news about the Town Council's activities. It will also include full contact details for senior officers and councillors to assist residents wishing to ask questions and submit Freedom of Information requests.

5.3 Printed communications

The Town Council will use printed communications from time to time. These will be planned to get messages out to residents and the Town Council will seek to ensure that printed communications are value for money.

5.4 Advertising

Where is it appropriate to get a targeted message out to a particular group the Town Council will consider paid for advertising in print, digital or broadcast channels.

6. Social media

6.1 Choosing channels

The Town Council will actively use social media to communicate with residents, and will assess which channels are most appropriate, bearing in mind costs, usage and effectiveness. This may change from time to time, and individual projects may require specific channels or accounts.

6.2 Social media principles

The Town Council will post frequently on its own social media channels, and will support local interests and businesses. The Town Council will not exclusively promote or endorse specific products or businesses. Retweeting or sharing does not mean endorsement. The Town Council will work with the rules of each social media network. It has the right to block or report any account that is using inappropriate or offensive language, spamming, causing a nuisance or harassing councillors, officers or consultants.

7. Social media channels and customer service/complaints

The Town Council does not monitor its social media channels 24 hours a day and as such channels are not intended for complaints. Those wishing to complain to the Council should do so by referring to the Customer Service Standards. Where questions are asked within business hours, responses shall be made as quickly as possible, taking care to be accurate. Where a general answer can be found on the website, the Town Council will share this information.

8. Personal use of social media

Councillors, officers and consultants should be aware that when using social media in a personal capacity it is expected they will behave appropriately and in line with council policies, procedures and codes of conduct.

In all matters involving the Town Council, Councillors, officers and consultants have a duty to support the democratic process and the corporate body of the Town Council regardless of their own personal views. Individuals may wish to add a disclaimer to their social media profile to make it clear that the account is personal – for example: ‘These views are my own’.

Where Councillors are expressing political views they should make it clear that they are speaking on their own behalf and not representing or speaking for the Town Council. There will be occasions when individual Councillors do not support decisions reached by the Town Council. In such cases, Councillors may wish to post on social media their reasons for opposing a particular course of action but must recognise that the Town Council, as a corporate body, debated the issue and reached a democratic decision. All Councillors have a duty to respect the validity of such decisions and to ensure that the Town Council’s reputation is not damaged or adversely affected. Individuals should check their online privacy settings.

It is important to understand who can see the information that is published and to know who can view personal information. Councillors, officers and consultants must comply with other council policies, procedures and codes of conduct when using social media, particularly confidentiality issues and proprietary information policies.

9. Resourcing

The Town Council shall resource its communications activity appropriately. The Finance and General Purposes Committee will be responsible for resourcing issues.

10. Transparency

The Town Council will be transparent in sharing the budget allocated to communications, marketing and social media.

11. Pre-election period or 'Purdah'

The six-week run up to an election - local, general or European is a time of heightened political sensitivity. Separate guidelines will be produced for these occasions.

Communications Strategy 2024/2025 Action Plan

Table of planned actions to achieve desired objectives, including measurement and impact

Website					
	Activity	Date	Measurement	Responsibility	Impact
1.	The website should be streamlined, fast and easy to navigate. Complete review of information required. Improve the clarity of information. Museum Manager would like a separate website for the Museum.	TBC – at least 2025	None	DTC & website provider	Faster responding website with easily found current and relevant information.
2.	Continue to remove old posts, documents and images to guarantee information is current and accurate	Ongoing	Size of website	DTC (and all staff uploading information)	Faster responding website with easily found current and relevant information

Social Media					
	Activity	Date	Measurement	Responsibility	Impact
1.	Use analytics to record current levels of use for comparison with future levels to ascertain growth	Ongoing	Comparison of analytics year on year	Website provider	Provides evidence of growth and highlights effective campaigns and messages
2.	Build Social Media Audiences – log current numbers of followers on X, Facebook and Instagram	Ongoing	Set realistic targets for increase in numbers by Spring 2025	DTC	Direct communication and key message/information sharing with residents and enhanced reputation, earn trust and engage in two-way conversations
3.	Create engaging social media content such as video to explain Council priorities, get across key information to customers and stakeholders. Use of programs such as Canva Pro.	Ongoing	Social media analytics to gauge followers gained and viewing demographics	DTC	Greater impact and engagement with residents regarding Council campaigns, information, key messages

4.	Raise awareness of Abingdon Town Council services and activities	Ongoing	Include survey 1 x per year in The Town Crier and assess feedback to demonstrate increased understanding of areas of responsibility.	Mayor's Secretary & DTC	Residents are better informed about who does what
5.	Broadcast video reporting by Councillors on hot topics and issues arising from complaints	Ongoing	Customer Feedback and commentary	DTC, Mayor's Secretary, Councillors	Residents have direct response from councillors and become familiar with them and how they work for the town.
6.	Trial live-streaming of events including council meetings on social media.	End of 2025	None	Democratic Services Officer	Greater attendance at meetings and other streamed events for those who may not otherwise be able to be there

Printed Publications

1.	Consider publishing The Town Crier on website, as well as a more limited printed run. Printed copies could be available from the library and information centre.	TBC	None	Mayor's Secretary	Meets the expectations of modern customers; reduce costs; offers choice to residents and addresses preferences.
----	--	-----	------	-------------------	---

Press & Media

1.	Maintain a relationship with press and media contacts taking a proactive approach to Council news. Monitor press coverage and record whether stories are positive/neutral or negative	Ongoing	90 per cent of all press releases used by the media in one year period 95 per cent positive or neutral tone of coverage	DTC/Admin staff	Key messages reaching a wide audience Council's reputation protected and perceptions enhanced
2.	Respond swiftly to press and media requests and provide comment where possible and relevant	Ongoing	Meet deadlines 90% of the time as a minimum measured	DTC (in consultation with TC/CEO & Councillors)	Mutually co-operative relationships with key contacts across all press and media

			over one year period		
3.	Continue to monitor the media for potentially damaging reputational issues.	Ongoing	Negative coverage – falls below 5% target, measured over one year period	DTC	Reputation of Council protected Customers can trust what the council says. Misinformation is corrected quickly
4.	Develop relationships with local TV journalists	Ongoing	More TV coverage - target is 2 slots in a one-year period	DTC/Councillors	Raise the Council's profile further and reach a wider audience