



COMMUNICATIONS POLICY



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This policy applies to all of the communication activities of the shared service between South Hams District and West Devon Borough Councils.
- 1.2 Good communication is the responsibility of all of the employed Officers and elected Members of both councils, it is underpinned and supported by a shared Communications Team whose primary function is to communicate the business of the councils as defined in Our Plan, the councils' themes, objectives and their annual delivery plans.
- 1.3 Through the Communications Protocol (reviewed January 2016), the Communication Team will support Officers and Members and promote the best practice communication principles of this policy.

2. AUDIENCES

- 2.1 Our audiences are everyone with whom we communicate and that could be through any medium or channel. They include:
 - Officers
 - Elected Members
 - Residents and prospective residents
 - Organisations and groups
 - Businesses
 - Partners
 - Neighbouring authorities
 - MP's
 - Professional peers and other authorities
 - Tourists and visitors
 - Local, regional, national and trade media
- 2.2 Letting customers know what their councils are doing for them, what they get for their money and who's responsible for the services they use, underpins what good local government communication is all about.
- 2.3 This policy will be further supported by a separate internal communications plan, which will provide Officers with a framework for how we are going to support them through communication and enable them to be able to deliver

quality customer focused services. That plan will adhere to the same communication principles as laid out in this policy.

3. CHANNELS

- 3.1 South Hams District and West Devon Borough Councils' communicate with residents through a wide variety of channels including, letters, face to face, over the phone, over the internet, printed material, events, through media and social media.
- 3.2 It is the intention of the councils to provide their customers with a wide variety of options, different channels through which they can interact with their council and access services when and how they wish.
- 3.3 This would include providing customers with the technology to self-serve via the internet, taking control of their interactions with council services and more opportunities to have a face to face discussion with Officers.
- 3.4 In a changing digital world where new forms of communications are being continually explored, it is the responsibility of the councils' Communication Team to continually review how they reach their audiences, applying the most appropriate method to the right audience at the best time to deliver the best outcome for the customer.
- 3.5 This policy will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it meets the needs of both councils and delivers on the communication goals of the councils' vision and annual delivery plan.

4. PRINCIPLES

- 4.1 This policy sets out to ensure that with all Council communications:

We are **customer focused**, informative and positive in our external communications, actively promoting local democracy, and involving our residents and businesses in decision making.

The messages we send are **transparent, consistent, accurate, clear and timely** and in keeping with both councils' vision.

We provide an **open, professional, fair and efficient service** to our media where we will be open, honest and proactive. The councils are committed to open government and a positive working relationship with the media.

We **protect the reputation** of the councils, the Officers and the Members, by supporting them and equipping them with the most up to date information.

That our communication **is legal** and adheres to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity published in March 2011 and other legislation as laid out in the Communication Protocol (reviewed January 2016)

5. MEDIA PROTOCOL

- 5.1 South Hams District and West Devon Borough Councils Communications Team perform the function of a centralised press office, who have produced a Media Protocol for working with the media, it states that:
- 5.2 All press releases, statements and photograph calls concerning the business of the councils should be arranged and issued by the Communications Team.
- 5.3 All media are advised that if they want a comment or statement about matters relating to the business of the councils, they must come through the Communications Team.
- 5.4 If approached by the media for a comment or statement all elected Members and employed Officers should speak to the Communications Team.
- 5.5 Nothing in this policy or the protocol precludes Members or political groups from speaking to or contacting the media. Members must however make it clear on whose behalf they are speaking:
- **Officially as an elected Member of the South Hams District or West Devon Borough Council** - (the Communications Team should be informed before the communication takes place, to ensure Members are fully briefed and supported)
 - **Officially on behalf of their particular political group** - (the Communications Team cannot aid or assist with this communications, they must remain politically neutral)
 - **Personally as a Ward or Borough Councillor** - (Speaking freely to the press about matters arising in a ward or borough is naturally part of what makes a Councillor a spokesperson for the people they represent, and the Communications Team would not want to do anything that prevents this from happening. However, when Councillors speak to the press about the business of their Council within their ward, they are advised to seek advice from the Communications Team to ensure that they have the latest information. This could include the latest information on Council processes and responsibilities, an update on a particular issue or a press statement issued by a partner organisation on the same subject. The role of the

Communications Team in this respect is to support the Ward Members and to ensure that they give out factually correct information)

- 5.6 If an elected Member wishes to make a Party Political statement, the Communications Team are not able to help them.
- 5.7 The Communications Team will respond to enquiries from the media on behalf of both councils in accordance with legislation and the law. It is the Communications Team who are responsible for collating, writing and issuing all press releases on behalf of each council.
- 5.8 Where ever possible the spokesperson for the Council should be an Elected Member of the Council but occasionally the Executive Directors, Group Managers and Specialists may be required to respond to the media on projects and initiatives they have a direct involvement in. This will usually be to answer questions of fact and provide technical information about their areas of expertise.
- 5.9 Officers should not speak to the media about the business of the Council without speaking to the Communications Team.
- 5.10 When taking photographs or videos to support a communications, all Officers should be aware that when the story involves taking photographs of children or young people, formal permission must be sought from the parent or guardian responsible for the child/young person. With older children (16 - 18 year olds) it is good practice to seek their permission directly as well as asking their parent or guardian. Before the image can be used a consent form must be provided.
- 5.11 If there is an occasion where we can increase the reach of our messages by also issuing press releases to local parishes, parish magazines, Facebook group editors and target locally specific messages to reach certain communities the Communications Team will issue the release to those specific groups of people.
- 5.12 As part of the communications planning, the Communications Champions will be encouraged to think about their audiences and how we can use all of the technology at our disposal including the Experian Data to target our messages to reach specific demographics and groups of people. This work will help inform when and where the press releases get issues.
- 5.13 Mistakes should be acknowledged and apologised for 'on behalf of the Council' where appropriate and where we are able to do so following

discussions with the Executive Directors and/or Leader in conjunction with the Lead Specialist.

- 5.14 There are occasions where the media coverage of a particular issue is incorrectly reported. After discussion with the Communications Team, Executive Directors and Lead Specialist, contact should be made with the media concerned to redress the balance.
- 5.15 Embargoes should only be used when news releases **are linked** to an event or specific date , when an issue of **confidentially** requires it; or when it is required by a **third party**
- 5.16 With negative stories in the media the councils take a realistic approach correcting matters of fact only and not getting embroiled in a public debate.

6. PUBLIC MEETINGS

- 6.1 In 2014 the Government introduced new rights by the Openness of Local Government Bodies 2014, which would enable members of the public to know how decisions are made
- 6.2 The councils' support the principle of transparency and openness and the new rights which allow use of modern technology and communication methods such as **filming, audio-recording, blogging and tweeting** to report the proceedings of the meetings of their councils and other local government bodies.

7. THE LAW

- 7.1 All communication must be lawful the following laws may apply to the communications activities of both councils.
- 7.2 All of our activities are governed by the Local Government Acts 1972 and 1986 as well as the updated Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity published in March 2011. A copy of the Code of Recommended Practice is available [here](#).
- 7.3 It states that Local Authority publicity **MUST**:
- 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.

7.4 Other legislation also has a bearing on communications activities and these include the:

- Data Protection Act 1998 (individuals rights over personal information),
- the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the right to obtain information held by public authorities)
- laws of defamation – slander (the spoken word) and libel (written).
- Copyright Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

**Any questions concerning this policy should be directed to the
Communications Team:**

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SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY 1. INTRODUCTION



1.1 Social media is any web-based tool which allow users to interact with each other in some way. This includes blogs, message boards, social networking websites (such as Facebook and Twitter), content sharing websites (such Flickr and YouTube) and many other

2. PRINCIPLES FOR THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1 Councillors, Officers and the council itself will use social media in different ways. However, there is a set of universal principles that are useful to keep in mind.

- **Be human:** be approachable in your language and tone; behave online as you would in person.
- **Be engaging:** respond to questions and join in when you can move the conversation on or help.
- **Be professional:** remember that you represent your council, so be aware of how your public voice comes across.
- **Share and attribute:** you can share what others have posted but it is polite to acknowledge and attribute where this has come from.
- **Go to where your audience is:** if the section of the population you want to connect with is on a particular platform, forum or group, join it.
- **Content is king:** by creating sharable and engaging content you can contribute to the conversation and be heard.
- **Be authentic:** don't pretend to be something you are not.
- **Be strategic:** plan ahead – who do you want to engage with, why and how? What do you want to achieve?

The internet is forever: be aware that what you post now could be found in years to come

3. CORPORATE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

3.1 The councils' use of social media will comply with the **laws of libel, copyright and data protection.**

- 3.2 Social media content is subject to the same rules of **fairness, openness and transparency** as the councils' uses in all their communications.
- 3.3 Social media should **NEVER** be used in a way that breaches any of the councils' other policies.
- 3.4 During times of major incident, emergency or crisis, social media should be employed **as a key tool** for keeping communities informed.
- 3.5 All complaints made via social media will be diverted back through the Customer Call Centre to ensure that they get entered onto the single workflow and are recorded in the same way as all other complaints.
- 3.6 Social media use by the councils should concentrate **on facts**. The councils' official social media sites will not be used for political gain or campaigning.
- 3.7 When dealing with errors or controversial comments about them, the councils will **not remove** criticism unless it contains swear words etc. Instead, responses will concentrate on correcting factual errors and responding to legitimate criticism.
- 3.8 **Derogatory or offensive** comments will be removed from official Council social media sites.

4. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR WORK

- 4.1 Both councils encourage employees to make reasonable and appropriate use of social media as part of their work. It is an important part of how the councils' communicate with their residents. This is subject to the councils' existing rules on the appropriate use of ICT equipment and systems.
- 4.2 Employees may contribute to the councils' social media activities (in liaison with the Communications Team). Employees must be aware at all times that, while contributing to the councils' social media activities, they are representing the organisation. Officers using social media as part of their work must adhere to the following rules:
- Use the same safeguards as they would with any other form of communication about the organisation in the public sphere

- Obtain permission from a manager before embarking on a public campaign using social media and work with the Communications Team to deliver it.
- Officers and Members should only use social media accounts which have been corporately set up in the councils' names.
- Be aware of and follow the councils' guidelines for using social media
- Be aware of and follow the councils' Communications Protocol
- Follow the Officers code of conduct in their use of social media and be aware that breaches will result in disciplinary procedure
- Always use #SHDC or #WDBC, this will enable people to follow each council on one single thread – if we are successful are promoting this # we can explore more

5. PERSONAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

5.1 If Officers use social media in their personal lives it must be separate from the councils' official sites. Employees are allowed to say that they work for the councils, but if they do we would advise that their personal social media profile should include a statement along the following lines:

”The views I express here are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council.”

5.2 Officers should not engage in any social media activity which would bring the councils into disrepute.

5.3 By working for the Councils, Officers should realise that sometime they are in a privileged position of having access to politically, financially and personally sensitive information.

5.4 Where we would encourage all Officers to share the information coming from their Council, with their wider networks, both personal and professional, they should **ONLY** share information which has come from an **OFFICIAL COUNCIL** social media channel **FIRST**.

6. PUBLIC MEETINGS

- 6.1 In 2014 the Government introduced new rights by the Openness of Local Government Bodies 2014, which would enable Members of the public to know how decisions are made: [Open and Accountable Local Government August 2014](#)
- 6.2 We would encourage the use of social media during the meeting to bring the discussions to a wider audience in accordance with these new rights.
- 6.3 Handheld devices and laptops are permitted (indeed encouraged) for use during meetings to allow environmentally friendly and effective communication. The use of such devices is intended to improve communication during meetings – not to interrupt or distract anyone taking part.
- 6.4 **The volume on all electronic devices is turned to ‘mute’.**
- 6.5 Councillors’ tweets/blogs during council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting - tweeting/blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting.
- 6.6 Councillors have a responsibility to take council business seriously and it is not appropriate for Members to use social media to tease or insult other Members. The councils’ residents expect debate and to be informed about council business, not witness petty arguments.
- 6.7 The use of the hashtag #SHDC or #WDBC when tweeting about the business of the councils is encouraged, this will enable us to track and monitor our reach and give customers a way of following what is going on.

7. RETWEETING COUNCILLORS

- 7.1 Often the work of elected member reinforces the business of the council, such as attending events, or community projects that have been supported, funded or set up by the Council.
- 7.2 The Communications Team **CAN** retweet a message posted by an Elected Member, which promotes this activity as long as it: is **NOT** politically motivated, **DOES** relate directly to the business of the council and **DOESNOT** break the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity published in March 2011.

8. NETWORKING AND SHARING

8.1 Second tier Local Authorities play a vital role in the sharing of information and the support of County Councils and other government agencies.

8.2 The Communications Team in collaboration with the Communications Champions will decide when the councils should be retweeting and supporting the campaigns, initiatives of our partners, what messages are relevant for our audiences and when they support the business of the councils,

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