



## COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA POLICY

### Introduction

Credition Town Council (CTC) receives enquiries from the media, constituents, and wider members of the public every year.

The purpose of this protocol is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Town Clerk, Mayor, all employees, and all members and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest.

The aim of the protocol is to ensure that CTC is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, CTC's outside communications should be:

- Open and honest
- Proactive
- Responsive and timely.

This protocol acts as a reference tool for any employee or councillor who engages with the media or communicates with members of the public. It also includes guidance on personal use of social media where it could be deemed to have a negative impact on CTC's reputation.

This protocol applies to all CTC employees and members.

### Legal Issues

There are circumstances under which employers can be held legally responsible for content published by their employees. This may include action taken as part of their role for the organisation and material published on official organisation channels or somewhere that has been previously sanctioned by CTC. It is therefore important to make all employees aware of the potential legal issues with regards to communication.

It is important that employees are aware that communicating information about CTC cannot be isolated from their working life. For example, any information published online can be accessed around the world within seconds and will be publicly available for all to see.

Employees and members should take the following into consideration when using social media:

- Be aware of the guidelines for using social media, whether this is for personal use or as a part of their working role (See "SOCIAL MEDIA").
- Be familiar with the legal areas outlined below before writing or speaking about colleagues or sharing information about CTC.
- Ensure that verbal or written information does not disclose privileged or confidential information.

### **Libel and defamation**

Defamation is the act of making a statement about a person or company that is considered to harm reputation, for example, by lowering others' estimation of the person or company, or by causing them to lose their rank or professional standing. If the defamatory statement is written down (in print or online) it is known as libel. If it is spoken, it is known as slander. There are exceptions to this - posting a defamatory statement online or recording it on a podcast would both be examples of libel.

### **Other points to note**

An organisation may be held responsible for something an employee has written or said if it is on behalf of the company or on a company-sanctioned space. Action can also be taken against anyone repeating libellous information from another source, so careful checks are needed before quoting statements from websites. This can also apply to linking to defamatory information. You should consider whether a statement can be proved before writing or using it – in law, the onus is on the person making the statement to establish its truth.

### **Publicity**

The media play a huge role in informing residents about what CTC does and how it spends their money (at all tiers of Government). It is therefore vital that CTC communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible will take a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews. This approach will help achieve the following objectives:

- Ensure that CTC is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and which listens
- Share and celebrate CTC's successes
- Give information about policies and services and about the democratic process so that people feel more informed about CTC's work
- Handle negative issues clearly and decisively

### **Publicity in Election Periods**

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself all proactive publicity from CTC about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national, or European elections.

During this period, CTC publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual members or groups of members. This is to make sure that no individual or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this protocol.

## **Young People and Publicity**

Guidelines should be followed if commissioning photographs of children (i.e. under 18 years of age) or if planning photography of children at events and using visual media for publicity purposes.

## **The Media**

The local press generally only covers stories relevant to people living and working in Crediton and the immediate surrounding areas for example the Crediton Courier. Other local media include radio stations such as BBC Devon, Heart FM, and Radio Exe all of which have specific target audiences.

Regional media includes newspapers like the Western Morning News.

It is rare that CTC would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level however, the protocol remains pertinent in these cases.

## **Identifying Newsworthy Items and Handling Media Enquiries**

It is the responsibility of everyone working within CTC to identify worthy news items and this should be done as early as possible. These might include Mayoral engagements, events or promoting successes of CTC. Ideas for news items should be sent to the Town Clerk.

The Town Clerk will coordinate all media enquiries. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the lead officer, councillor, or Mayor to respond to the enquiry, in line with this protocol.

Officers who are directly approached by a member of the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without gleaning the full facts and should confer with the Clerk before responding. However simple, factual queries will be dealt with appropriately by the office.

Members who are directly approached by a member of the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol.

CTC should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual officers and members. CTC is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

## **News or Press Releases**

News / press releases are one of the key techniques for publicising council activities, decisions, and achievements.

There are two types of press releases – Official Council Press Releases and Councillor Press Releases.

### Official Council Press Releases:

An official council release is made on behalf of CTC as a whole; it will be written by an officer and authorised by the Town Clerk. It is non-party political and will normally include a quote from the relevant councillor(s). This is usually the Mayor or Committee Chair.

Official council press releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of CTC, contain relevant facts, and include an approved quotation from the appropriate councillor. Matters of style, presentation, punctuation, grammar etc are the responsibility of the author.

Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual members, identify a political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official council news/press releases will be placed on the CTC website within three working days of issue.

It should be borne in mind that a news or press release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and alternative ways of advertising it should be considered e.g. posters, mailings, websites, social networking etc.

#### Councillor Press Releases:

Members can issue personal press releases, and these should be signed in a personal capacity without the word councillor attached to the name. Such press releases are personal and are written and issued by the councillor responsible. This release may or may not be political and should not include the name of any officer, use the council logo or the council telephone number as a point of contact. It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases, especially those of a factual nature, to be provided to the Town Clerk. Members seeking advice can contact the Town Clerk.

#### **Interviews**

Any officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to the Town Clerk, the Mayor, or the appropriate Committee Chair. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist.

Officers should never give their opinion on specific council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of CTC's approved and agreed policies.

#### **Media Activity Ahead of Meetings**

The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All agendas are automatically published on the CTC website.

Members of the media are welcome to attend and regularly do attend meetings. During meetings, members should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture, rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what can be a complex issue or report.

#### **Non-Council Related Media Activity**

Officers and members who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-council related organisations must not refer to their CTC posts and must make it clear to the

journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-council related organisation.

### **Managing Negative Issues**

From time to time CTC has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Officers and members 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.

Officers and members must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

### **Correcting Inaccurate Reporting**

Should the media (a newspaper or broadcaster) publish/broadcast something inaccurate about CTC, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

The issue should be discussed with the Town Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. Also to decide who the most appropriate person is to take the necessary agreed action i.e. the Mayor, Committee Chair or Lead Officer.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain. Each case must be judged individually.

Occasionally CTC will get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by holding hands up, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.

### **NEWSLETTER**

Quarterly, CTC creates its own newsletter. It aims to promote policies, services, activities, and initiatives. The content is created in house in consultation with any appropriate members. Ideas for articles will be welcomed and these should be passed directly to the Assistant Clerk.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

#### **What is social media?**

‘Social media’ is the term commonly given to websites, online tools and other Information Communication Technologies (ICT) which allow users to interact with each other in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. As the name implies, social media involves the building of communities or networks, encouraging participation and engagement. This protocol will also apply to any new or emerging technologies or systems which may develop in the future.

### **The aims of this protocol are:**

- To ensure that social media used to communicate with the public, partners, or other stakeholders by all officers in the performance of their duties are aligned to the view of CTC.
- To ensure that all CTC social media sites are easily identifiable as originating from CTC and correctly apply the council's logo and brand guidelines.
- To protect the reputation of CTC while embracing the possibilities of this channel.
- To ensure that CTC communication through social media meets legal requirements and is consistent with other communication activities.
- To prevent the unauthorised use of CTC branding on employees' or members personal social media sites.

### **Applying this protocol: Council-run channels**

- Officers and members considering the use of, or wishing to use, social media as a channel for a project or campaign must first discuss and agree this with the Town Clerk and Mayor.
- Social media channels already featuring CTC's logo or branding must comply with brand guidelines.
- The unauthorised use of the CTC logo or branding on social media channels may result in action under the disciplinary procedure.
- Officers will be responsible for maintaining CTC's profile on the relevant social media sites, with overall responsibility being that of the Town Clerk.
- Care must be taken by multiple account users when posting to social media sites, to ensure activity is being assigned to the correct account.
- It is recommended that posts to social media are reviewed by another officer before publication to avoid unintentional errors being posted.
- Social media will be used to enable CTC to:
  - Engage with individuals and communities
  - Promote council services
  - Announce the date of forthcoming meetings
  - Cross promote other council communication tools e.g. website, press releases, linking Facebook to Twitter account etc.
  - Providing information on local events, council initiatives and achievements
  - Advise on maintenance work due to be carried out
  - Bring relevant local information to the attention of the community.

### **Applying this protocol: personal use of social media channels**

If you already refer to your employment/involvement in CTC on a personal internet site as defined above, or you intend to create such a site, you should inform the Town Clerk who will advise you of the appropriateness of doing this in line with the advice below:

- Do not engage in activities on the internet that might bring the Council into disrepute.
- Do not use the CTC logo on personal web pages.
- Do not reveal information which is confidential to CTC - consult the Town Clerk if you are unsure.
- Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or officers without their permission.

- Under no circumstance should offensive comments be made about CTC, members, or colleagues on the internet. This may amount to cyber-bullying or defamation and could be deemed a disciplinary offence.

### **Social media campaigns**

Officers or members who are considering social media campaigns should firstly consult the Town Clerk for guidance. Coordinating efforts and using a corporate account can ensure that the project has a clear purpose, fits into existing CTC views and is suitable for the target audience they wish to reach.

### **Social Media Tips and Advice**

Social Media or Social Networking is both a broadcast medium and a receiving medium.

#### From the business point of view:

- It can be used as a receiving medium to gather opinions about CTC which have appeared on the social media networks. As such it is an invaluable tool to add to our understanding of what people think about us. As such this is a benign and useful tool.
- It is possible to broadcast using the same social media networks to engage with and talk to those who are interested enough to have a view. As such it is a useful and powerful tool.

#### From a personal point of view:

- Individuals employed by CTC are entitled to use whatever system they like outside of their working time and working persona, to engage in the social aspects of the media – both broadcasting and receiving.
- However great care should be taken to ensure the private/work line is not crossed.
- It is good practice to follow the stricture of never mentioning work, your opinions of your colleagues or processes and projects on your own private Social Media Networks. This aspect is covered in '*LEGAL ISSUES*'.

### **Freedom of Information and Data Protection**

Members are reminded that they must not misuse council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Should CTC receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (email or written), normally that correspondence would have to be disclosed, unless it was exempt. The fact that the disclosure of the correspondence may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.

In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

Refer to the Information Policy, Chapter 14 of the Council Constitution for further information and guidelines in this respect.

### **Internet Acceptable Use Policy**

Internet use covers all websites (including the CTC website), networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Bebo etc, forums and blogs which may be used by both officers and members.

If the above are used in an official capacity or on council related business, the guidance in this protocol must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Under the consideration of Acceptable Use, when acting in the capacity of CTC, websites should not:

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation, or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or used for campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful, or disrespectful manner
- If social media is used in an unofficial capacity, Members and Officers should restrain from making remarks that could be construed as bringing the Council into disrepute. Please see '*SOCIAL MEDIA*'.