

Deal Town Council Communications Policy

Introduction

Deal Town Council aims to be open and transparent in everything it does. The Town Council will take every opportunity to communicate with our community and beyond the community, to raise awareness of the Town Council's work, events and activities.

Deal Town Council's role is to serve its community first and foremost, which means we need to understand what people want and need. The Council will provide opportunities for members of our community to send us information and views in a range of ways. This information will be fed into our decision-making process wherever possible.

Our Communications Policy includes the general principles which underpin our communications. It is accompanied by a Communications Strategy which explains how we will provide effective communications.

Policy context

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity ('the Code'). The Code is statutory guidance and the Town Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions. Key requirements include

Publicity by local authorities 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 detailed Code and its accompanying Memorandum can be accessed here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recommended-code-of-practice-for-local-authority-publicity>

The Communications Policy also takes account national guidance for town councils, for example "The Good Councillor's Guide 2020" (National Association of Local Councils).

The Town Council's Standing Order No 21 refer to relations with the press / media and to the Town Council's Media and Publicity Policy. The Communications Policy and the Communications Strategy govern the relations with the Press and Media as referred to in Standing order 21.

This policy is effective from 26 January 2021 and replaces the Media and Publicity Policy and the Councillor Communications Policy. It will be reviewed biannually.

Aims

Effective communications enable public bodies, organisations, residents and visitors to understand and appreciate what Deal Town Council does to make Deal “a thriving town in which to live work and visit”. The Deal Town Council Communications Policy and the Communications Strategy linked to it will lay out how we communicate with all public bodies, organisations, residents and visitors.

Values

Our communication, consultation and marketing activities will meet our values of openness and honesty, trust and respect.

We will

- Treat everyone equally
- Be prompt, courteous and respectful
- Use plain language and avoid jargon where possible

Our Communications Objectives

Below are some of the objectives for our communications:

- To explain the council’s work and operations
- To show how decisions are made by the council and the committees
- To flag up events and activities led by or supported by the council
- To encourage understanding of and enable discussion of Deal Town Council’s work
- To share information from other bodies and organisations
- To send out alerts from health bodies, police or fire services etc
- To direct people to organisations who can offer support

Listening to our community

Communication is a two-way process, Our Communications Strategy will maximise opportunities for public bodies, organisations, residents and visitors to communicate with Deal Town Council in a way which suits them.

Responsibility for Deal Town Council Communications

The Town Clerk is responsible for all communications from the Town Council. Responsibility for communications may be delegated to the Deputy Town Clerk and the Communications Officer for specific tasks.

Councillors do not have the right to communicate on behalf of the Town Council.

Internal communications

Email and MS Teams (virtual meeting software) are used primarily for the day to day running of the Council. Weekly Team Meetings and one to one sessions enable staff to share information and give feedback.

Council Communications with Members

Most communications with Members will be via the official Email channels. Where there is an immediate need to speak to someone, from officer to Member or Member to officer, a phone call may be more appropriate. A brief note will be made by the officer concerned, recording the date and the purpose of the call.

The Council will use Members' deal.gov.uk email address for all official mail. Members' personal Email addresses will be used if the official address is not available. GDPR rules will be observed concerning storage of Members' personal contact details.

Members' Email to other persons

Members will use their deal.gov.uk address for all official matters, including casework.

An agreed Email signature will be used, including the link to the online Deal Town Council Privacy Policy.

APPENDIX 1 of the Communications Strategy contains the already approved **Councillor Communications Policy - Acceptable Use of Email**, which should be read in tandem with this Communications Policy.

Correspondence with external parties

Except where Council has asked the Chairman to send a letter, the Town Clerk is responsible for sending all correspondence from the Council to other bodies. Correspondence is generally requested or authorised by the Town Council. The Town Clerk will also send correspondence on operational or other matters, by delegated authority as the Proper Officer.

Individual Members should not communicate with another body, statutory, voluntary or commercial organisation, other than in a personal or ward councillor capacity, unless otherwise agreed.

Social Media Principles

The Town Council will use social media where it feels this will benefit the community and the Council. Our Social Media content will:

- Be accessible for all
- Be relevant, clear and factual
- Encourage positive two-way engagement

We will be clear about Deal Town Council's areas of responsibility. Where we receive a query, comment or other feedback which does not apply to Deal Town Council we will do our best to redirect the respondent to the relevant body.

Deal Town Council Communications Strategy

Introduction

Deal Town Council aims to be open and transparent about the way it operates. The Deal Town Council Communications Policy lays out the general principles which underpin our communications. This Communications Strategy explains in more detail how, when and why the Council will carry out communications.

Who do we want to communicate with? Who wants to communicate with us?

Stakeholders are the individuals or organisations the Town Council has a relationship with or a responsibility towards. We will communicate with them in a way which is appropriate to the message and which suits their needs.

Stakeholder mapping is a key part of any engagement process. Every authority will have a variety of stakeholders. These can include:

- *local residents*
- *area-based groups*
- *communities of interest*
- *faith-based groups*
- *racial, ethnic and cultural groups*
- *local community and voluntary groups*
- *web-based or virtual groups*
- *statutory partners*
- *businesses*
- *visitors*

NB We can't engage with all of the people all of the time and people don't want to be engaged on everything. (based on LGA Guide to Engagement, February 2019)

The media through which we communicate

The Council communicates to others through

- the Deal Town Council website - central to all our public communications
- Social media channels
- Press Releases
- Notice boards, posters, flyers
- Reports, newsletters, bulletins and meeting documentation
- MS Teams software enables people to view public meetings

Members of the community can communicate with Deal Town Council through

- Email, letter, personal visit or phone for individual enquiries
- On social media for comments and questions (which are visible to all)

- Engagement events and forums, open days and celebrations
- Consultation done online or otherwise
- In the public speaking session at Full Council meetings (items on the agenda)

Online Communications

Deal Town Council website – www.deal.gov.uk - is central to all online communications and serves as a repository of all council information. It will contain a “Contact Us” option so people can get in touch directly from the site. It will also contain consultation documents and links to surveys or questionnaires the Council may put in place from time to time.

It will be regularly updated with content from Deal Town Council. It may also contain certain information from other bodies and organisations. It will have links to other sites, especially those of other public bodies.

Less formal social media platforms are additional to the website and should steer people to the website where possible.

Other Communications

The Town Council uses a range of other media. Which medium to use is dictated by the nature of the information and the nature of the user. For example:

- **Meeting agendas and minutes** are available on the website and are provided in hard copy to councillors only.
- Deal Town Council’s **Annual Report** is available electronically and will be mentioned in press releases and email bulletins. A number of hard copy reports are printed and made available in the Town Hall, to maximise its reach.
- **News items** are sent directly to local news reporters, so that Council news can be spread via the local press.
- News items and more comprehensive **bulletins** may be sent out to relevant contacts by Email and added to social media too.
- The Council advertises its **events** through a press release to the local newspaper, in Email bulletins and on the Council’s noticeboard.
- **Noticeboards** in the town centre and at the Town Hall provide information on events and meetings. The Council also displays financial information and other governance information at the Town Hall. Recently noticeboards have been used for emergency advice and information from other public bodies too.

Catering for people with disabilities

Deal Town Council are keen to assist people who need extra support to read or understand communications from the council, or who need help to communicate with the council. We have a Hearing Loop in the Council Chamber to help people who are hard of hearing to follow live meetings. Hard copies and large print copies of publications can be provided on request for people with impaired vision.

What will we use and when?

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	web based media	events and meetings	reports, publications	email, bulletins *	notice boards and displays
Local residents	√	√	√	√	√
Area-based groups e.g. Mill Hill Forum	√			√	
Communities of interest e.g. cyclists in Deal	√	√		√	
Faith-based groups E.g. Churches Together or individual church groups	√	√		√	
Racial, ethnic and cultural groups e.g. members of the Jewish faith	√			√	
Local community and voluntary groups e.g. CAB, Age UK,	√	√	√	√	
Web-based or virtual groups e.g. members of popular Deal FB groups	√				
Statutory bodies, partners e.g. DDC, Walmer PC	√	√	√	√	
Businesses, including Chamber of Trade Love Local Deal, Deal Delivers	√	√	√	√	
Visitors	√				√

*People will opt in for emails – lists will be governed by GDPR

Responsibility for Social Media

The Clerk is responsible for all Deal Town Council social media activity. The Communications Officer will lead on planning and posting content. The Communications Officer may post Town Council information on other organisations' social media sites.

Deal Town Council Objectives for Social Media

Social media will be used to

- Raise awareness of Town Council decisions
- Advertise events and activities in which the Town Council is involved
- Publicise important meetings such as public consultations
- Raise awareness of important local issues
- Advertise vacancies

- Gather information and views

The Communications Officer will monitor public comments on our social media pages (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). The Town Clerk will have the authority to remove from Deal Town Council social media pages any posts made by third parties which are deemed to be offensive or of a defamatory, libellous nature. The latter will also be reported to the platform's complaints section.

Council Members - Communications

Where, after discussion with the Town Clerk, Council members wish to pursue an initiative on an individual or ward member basis they are welcome to do so but they should make it clear that they are acting in an unofficial/ward member capacity. They must

- a) take care not to give the impression that the initiative has the support of the Council or represents Council Policy
- b) not raise public or other partners or external bodies expectations
- c) not do anything which may lead to negative publicity or which may reflect on the Parish Council

Council Communications with Members

Most communications with Members will be via the official Email channels. Where there is an immediate need to speak to someone, from officer to Member or Member to officer, a phone call may be more appropriate. A brief note will be made by the officer concerned, recording the date and the purpose of the call.

The Council will use Members' deal.gov.uk email address for all official mail. Members' personal addresses will be securely stored but will only be used if the official address is not available. GDPR rules will be observed.

Members' Email to other persons

Members will use their deal.gov.uk address for all official matters, including casework. This address should not be used for personal communications. An agreed Email signature will be used, including the link to the Deal Town Council Privacy policy.

Members should be aware that the Town Clerk has the right to examine all deal.gov.uk communications.

APPENDIX 1 of the Communications Strategy contains the already approved **Councillor Communications Policy - Acceptable Use of Email**, which should be read in tandem with this Communications Strategy.

Council Members - Social Media

A Town Councillor who has her/his own social media accounts, whilst free to express her/his views, should use them with caution. It must be made clear that councillors' opinions are their own and not those of the Town Council.

Working with the Press

A request to Deal Town Council from the media will be discussed by the Mayor and Town Clerk and then forwarded to the most appropriate person - Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Committee Chair or Vice-Chair, Town Clerk or combination of those people to suggest a response on behalf of the Town Council.

Prior to its release the Mayor and Town Clerk should be made aware of the broad content of any response, where they are not involved in its preparation.

In responding to Media Articles, published letters, on-line comments, tweets, Facebook items every situation must be carefully assessed and in many cases a response will not be appropriate.

In assessing whether a response is appropriate the following will be considered:

- Is the article / item in question factually accurate?
- Is the article / item expressing a personal view – and if so is that clearly stated?
- Would further discussion on the subject be constructive?

Anyone seeing an article / item and thinking a response may be needed should inform the Mayor and the Town Clerk.

Press Releases

- The Town Clerk, Mayor and Committee Chairs will identify issues and stories that have the potential to be of interest to the public.
- The Town Clerk will draft press or media releases consulting with the Mayor and Committee Chairs or any individual Councillor as appropriate.
- A copy of the final release will be sent to the Mayor and any Councillor who is quoted in the text.
- Media releases will be sent to relevant media outlets as determined by the Town Clerk following consultation with the Mayor.
- A copy of the release will be posted on the Town Council's website.

- A copy of the release will be included in the Town Clerk's update to full council.

Council Members and the Press

The Mayor and the Town Clerk should be made aware immediately of all approaches made to individual Councillors from the press for interviews, statements or information relating to Deal Town Council. Where possible, the enquiry should be passed to the Town Clerk to manage. A simple register will be kept in the Town Council offices detailing all requests and the response.

If the councillor responds to a request for comment they must only respond in their capacity as an individual/ward councillor.

Please also see - A Note about pre-election restrictions on publicity (Purdah)

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/pre-election-period>

APPENDIX 1

Councillor Communications Policy - Acceptable Use of Email

1. Scope

This policy applies to all Deal Town Councillors.

Definitions

Deal Town Council email account/address and/or official email account/address

An email account and address provided by Deal Town Council – this will end in @deal.gov.uk

Authorised user

A person who holds an official email account and address

Official business

Examples:

Contacting DTC staff

Contacting DTC Cllrs regarding DTC business e.g items on agendas – recommendations

Responding to emails/queries from members of the public

2. Policy

To mitigate the identified risks above and to align Deal Town Council procedures with the General Data Protection Regulation the following will be adopted.

- 1 All Deal Town Councillors will be issued with a Deal Town Council email account which will operate through the Deal Town Council's ICT service.
- 2 Councillors will be required to use this account to conduct official business to do with their role as a Deal Town councillor.
- 3 Official business may not be conducted through any private email account.

3. Policy Aims

- To highlight issues affecting the use of all email services.
- To inform users about the acceptable use of official email accounts.
- To describe the standards that authorised users must maintain.
- To provide guidelines for use of official email.
- To warn authorised users of the consequences of inappropriate use of official email
- To state the actions that will be taken to monitor the effectiveness of this policy.

4. Risk

There are a range of risks associated with councillors accessing and handling information via email. This policy aims to mitigate the following risks:

- Information and data security breaches.
- Unauthorised users accessing official DTC emails.
- The introduction of viruses and malware onto the ICT network.
- The propagation of unwanted Email (spam).
- Users of the system using emails for improper or discriminatory use such as to bully or harass others.
- Damage to the reputation of the organisation.

More issues regarding the use of email:

- It should be noted that official emails and attachments may need to be disclosed under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000.
- Similarly, email and attachments in private email accounts, should they contain official business, may need to be disclosed under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This could extend to providing the ICO with access to all of a private Email account and/or the device official business is stored on.
- Users should be aware that deletion of email from accounts does not necessarily result in permanent deletion from the ICT systems.
- Email correspondence may be read by a person other than the designated recipient. Emails can easily be copied, forwarded or archived without the original sender's knowledge.
- Sensitive information (or worse, misinformation) could also end up in the press and public domain, and could damage the reputation of the council.
- The consequences of an email containing sensitive information being sent to an unauthorised person could be a fine for Deal Town Council from the Information Commissioner.

5. Guidelines for use of official email by councillors.

You **must**:

- First consider whether email is the most appropriate way of communicating the message, particularly when dealing with sensitive matters or where debate is likely.
- Send all emails which conduct or support official business of the council through your official email account.
- Be aware that the recipients of your messages will assume that you are acting on behalf of the council. Communicate appropriately.
- Adhere to a standard that is considered professional and polite. Ensure that any statement or comment does not inadvertently cause offence or misinterpretation

- Bear in mind that emails often need to be as formal as any other form of written correspondence. Use a suitable header and include your contact details. Use an appropriate format for the message text.
- Add the Deal Town Council disclaimer to every message.
- Check your incoming email frequently and ensure that all items that require attention are addressed within a reasonable time frame. If you will be absent for a period set up an automatic reply.
- Avoid the mass distribution/forwarding of messages, which can cause congestion on network systems, and can cause offence to some recipients. If you need to send an email to a large number of external contacts, or you want to attach a very large document, greater than 20mb, please contact the Town Clerk to advise of your proposed action.

You **must not**

- Make any statement or comment in an official email which reflects badly on the council, or which contradicts existing council policies.
- Send an email which is abusive, malicious, discriminatory, defamatory, or libellous about any person or organisation, or which may be considered to be illegal, obscene, or offensive material. (Before you send or forward any email, ask yourself if you could support your actions in a disciplinary hearing or in court)
- Forward jokes or messages that could be considered offensive by others or that could be discriminatory (as defined by the Equalities Act 2010) or send unsolicited bulk e-mail messages or “spam”.
- Send a message which could be deemed as bullying or harassment by the recipient.
- You must not make unprofessional comments about staff.
- Send information which may infringe the intellectual property rights of a person or organisation, for example, third party product information.
- Open unknown or unexpected attachments or emails from unknown sources if you suspect they may contain a virus. Contact the Town Clerk to report the email. **Do not** forward the suspected email to any other mailbox.

6. Policy Compliance

Monitoring of official emails.

Whilst respecting the privacy of authorised users, the council maintains its legal right, in accordance with the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, to monitor and audit the use of official emails by authorised users to ensure adherence to this Policy. Any such interception or monitoring will be carried out in accordance with the provisions of that Act.

The Town Clerk will monitor adherence to this policy by reviewing all official email accounts, including councillors’ accounts, at least once in any twelve month period. This will be done in random order and at random times. An account can be reviewed at any time if the Clerk feels there is any cause for concern.

Consequences of inappropriate use of the email service.

If any user is found to have breached this policy, the Town Clerk will advise the Chairman of the Council who will report to Full Council, further action may then be taken.

If a criminal offence is considered to have been committed further action may be taken by the council to assist in the prosecution of the offender(s).

If you do not understand the implications of this policy or how it may apply to you, seek advice from the Town Clerk. Support will be provided for councillors to set up and use official email accounts.