

**MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS POLICY  
WELLINGTON TOWN COUNCIL**

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**1. Introduction**

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The Code is statutory guidance and therefore councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

Failure to follow the Town Council's Policy on Media Communications could lead to a breach of the Statutory Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Council's reputation. It is important that all Members and Officers who might come into contact with the media understand

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the implications of this Code which this policy explains within a local context.

Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to ensure that the messages put out by the Council are consistent and accurate. However, if communication is managed effectively, the Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

Wellington Town Council throughout the year:

- Receives enquiries from the media
- Issues news releases
- Organizes photo opportunities
- Arranges interviews
- Posts on social media

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Members involved in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest. It is further to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be:

- Open and honest
- Proactive
- Responsive and timely
- In line with the Council's Equalities policy
- In line with the adopted Code of Conduct

### **2. The Town Council's approach to publicity**

The media plays a large role in informing residents about what the Council does and how it spends their money. It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible takes a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews so that

- The Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and willing to listen
- There are opportunities to share and celebrate the Council's successes
- Information is provided about policies and services as well as the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council and its work
- Negative issues are handled clearly and decisively

The main media are the local and regional press together with local radio and television stations. It is unlikely that Wellington would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level but this policy is written to ensure that it is relevant to these cases should they occur. It is also recognised that the internet is the fastest growing area of the media and that many broadcasters and newspapers include information on Wellington and Wellington Town Council.

### **3. Identifying Newsworthy Items**

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Clerk (as the Proper Officer) to make the decision as to whether or not a new release should be issued, having liaised with the Mayor or in their absence the Deputy Mayor and/or the appropriate committee chair..

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### **4. Handling Media Enquiries**

The Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the Town Council office. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the Deputy Clerk or Mayor to respond to the enquiry.

Members of the Town Clerk's staff who are directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without establishing the full facts and where possible should confer with the Clerk before responding.

Members of the Council who are directly approached by the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this policy.

The Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. The phrase "no comment" should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

### **5. Press Releases and Letters or Emails to the Media**

The use of press releases is a key technique for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.

There are two types of press releases :

#### (a) Council Press Releases

An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written and issued by the Clerk. Official Council 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 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, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a councillor's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official Council releases will be placed on the Council's website within one working day of issue.

#### (b) Press Releases issued by Councillors

Councillors should not issue press releases on behalf of the Council unless mandated by Full Council. Other press releases issued by Councillors are personal and these types of releases 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 must make clear that this is the personal views of the Councillor and not of the Town Council and the use of Cllr or Councillor should not be used (See Appendix C 1.5). It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases, especially those of a factual nature, to be provided to the Clerk prior to release. Councillors seeking advice are advised to contact the Clerk.

### **6. Interviews**

Any member of staff contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the

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matter to the Clerk, the Mayor or the appropriate committee Chairman. 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 being to provide expertise and factual knowledge only in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.

### **7. Media Coverage of Meetings**

Many stories relating to the Council will be picked up from agendas and reports in advance of meetings, all agendas being sent direct to local media and background papers being available on the Town Council website.

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Council and committee 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 may be a complex issue.

### **8. Publicity during Elections**

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 about candidates and other politicians is halted. This applies to scheduled local, national, or European elections. During this period Council 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 Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required, this may be provided by the relevant Officer in accordance with national guidelines.

### **9. Non-Council Related Media**

Officers and Members of the Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of organisations on which they are not a designated Council representative must not refer to their Council membership 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.

### **10. Managing Negative Issues**

From time to time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity. Members and Officers must alert the Clerk as soon as possible when a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest is made known to them. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

Members and Officers 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.

### **11. Correcting Inaccurate Reporting**

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the 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

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or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who is the most appropriate person to take the agreed action.

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 should be judged individually.

Occasionally the Council may get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising and stating how the Council will learn from the error or put it right.

### **12. Monitoring and Evaluation**

The Council office will continually monitor the media coverage and will discuss any concerns with the Mayor and/or Chairman of the relevant committee.

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

Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act on a topic on which there is correspondence (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt (further information is available from the Council's Model Publication Scheme). The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure. In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 1998 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.

### **14. Internet Use**

Internet use covers all websites, networking sites, forums and blogs which may be used by both Officers and Councillors. If they are used in an official capacity or on Council-related business, the guidance in this policy must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

When acting in the capacity of Wellington Town Council, 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.

### **15. Use of Social Media**

Authorised Users of the Official Wellington Town Council social media sites will be limited to the Officers in order to maintain and publicise events and decisions of the Town Council.

### **16 Why has the council introduced this policy?**

This policy supports Council's aim to improve the communication with residents

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(including harder to reach groups) through the effective use of social media.

- 16.1 The policy aims to ensure that the public are clear at all times about whether the employee, Councillor or third party contractor is communicating on behalf of the Council or as an individual.
- 16.2 Councils can use social media in many ways, including:
- Providing information about services
  - Supporting local democracy
  - Gathering customer insight and managing customer relationships
  - Promoting cultural and leisure events
  - Supporting local communities and developing a neighbourly approach
- 16.3 Councils who wish to help build a sense of belonging in a neighbourhood, increase resident satisfaction levels and reduce social problems can do much with social media as it is a way of connecting people, encouraging conversation and building trust.
- 16.4 Social media includes (but is not limited to) social networking sites (such as Facebook and LinkedIn); video and photo sharing websites (such as YouTube and Instagram); blogs and microblogs (such as Twitter); 'wiki' sites that can be edited by the public (such as Wikipedia) and forums or discussion boards.
- 16.5 This policy aims to make sure that employees, Councillors and third party contractors can actively take part in social networks so that local government keeps pace with the ways in which people like to engage.
- 16.6 This policy will help ensure that employees, Councillors and third parties understand and comply with all relevant legislation and Council policies which are relevant to the use of social media - whether the use is for official council business or personal.
- 16.7 Contractors are required to comply with this policy in the same way as employees and Members of the Council and this requirement will form part of contractual agreements.
- 16.8 The Council is keen to maximise its use of social media wherever this is helpful to our customers and residents as a communication channel.
- 16.9 Material published by the Council will not contain party political material and will not persuade the public to a particular political view, promote the personal image of a particular Councillor, promote a particular Councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations or personalise issues.
- 16.10 The Town Clerk will manage the implementation of this policy and the Council Office staff will manage the Council's corporate social media site and oversee other official sites which are service specific. Other methods of communication, such as press releases and the Council's website will continue to be used as appropriate.

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- 16.11 Service specific social media sites may only be created if agreed by Full Council to ensure that sites are consistent and to confirm whether or not the sites are actually required or whether the Council's corporate site should be used.
- 16.12 The Town Clerk will maintain a register of all Council social media sites and their users and will have access and administration rights to these.
- 16.13 Appendix A lists proposed authorised sites to be used by the Council.
- 16.14 Official Sites may only be accessed and edited by those who have been authorised to do so.
- 16.15 Those accessing and editing sites must attend Social Media training organised by the Council.

#### **17 Legal considerations – staying out of trouble online**

- 17.1 Any form of communication is rife with the possibility of misunderstandings. Social media is perhaps no more or less vulnerable to this but there are some new ways to misfire with your message.
- 17.2 Although the best use of social media is conversational in tone, publishing on the web is still publishing. It is important to remember that you are responsible for what you publish on social media. Authorised Users need to be acutely aware that anything on an Official Site, published on behalf of the Council, reflects upon the Council and its reputation.
- 17.3 In general terms, content must not be published which may result in actions which may be discriminatory, defamatory, breach copyright, data protection or other claims for damages. This includes (but is not limited to) material of an illegal, sexual, or offensive nature. Any such content published by a third party must be evidenced (through a screenshot or other robust method) and retained separately before it is removed.
- 17.4 When responding to negative content posted by third parties, it is important to acknowledge their view in a neutral way, state what will be done regarding their comment and if necessary, evidence their comment before removing it. Please refer to 3.2 and Appendix D for further guidance. Users should not make statements which affirm or support the comments and should avoid inviting further responses/dialogue on the matter.
- 17.5 Content for the promotion of personal financial interests, personal commercial ventures or personal campaigns must not be published on corporate accounts.

#### **18 General application of this policy**

- 18.1 All employees, whether Authorised Users or not, are required to adhere to this policy and guidance which forms part of the policy even when they are using social media for personal use. Employees should note that any breaches of the policy and guidance, for example, bullying of colleagues or social media activity causing serious damage to the organisation, may constitute gross misconduct and lead to summary dismissal.

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18.2 If you discover defamatory, confidential, obscene, or otherwise unlawful material that you consider affects the Council or any of its employees (whether in a public forum or via direct message) you should draw it to the attention of the Town Clerk or in the case of the Town Clerk to the Chair of the Council immediately. You must take their advice (and that of the Council's legal team where necessary) before taking any action on the social media site in question.

### 19 Equality

This policy and associated processes are designed to protect people from discrimination and harassment whilst broadening accessibility to information and communications.

### 20 Appendices and Other Information

- Appendix A Official Council Social Media Sites
- Appendix B Guidance for Officers,
- Appendix C Guidance for Councillors
- Appendix D Flowchart for Officers and Councillors

[www.geturvoiceheard.co.uk/doc/sn.php](http://www.geturvoiceheard.co.uk/doc/sn.php) – provides advice on safeguarding children and vulnerable adults: any Official Sites set up by the Council must ensure that these groups are closely monitored.

[www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk) – provides advice information and resources about online safety, including how to use custom settings.

### Code of Conduct

The Town Council has adopted a Code of Conduct and all matters relating to media communications should be conducted in line with the principles of this Code. See Appendix C for further information.

Signed ..... Mayor

Signed:..... Town Clerk

Dated:.....



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**Appendix A**

**Official Social Media Sites**



Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com))

Corporate /WellingtonClerk



Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com))

Corporate: /WellingtonTownCouncil



Instagram ([www.instagram.com](http://www.instagram.com))

Corporate: /wellington\_town\_council

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### Appendix B

#### Guidance for officers (this guidance forms part of the Council's Media Policy)

- 1 What to bear in mind to keep you protected online either at work or at home**
  - 1.1 When you engage online it is important to use your common sense. The things that can get you into difficulty anywhere else are just the same things to avoid in social media.
  - 1.3 You are personally responsible for what you publish on social media. It is important that you think before you publish as words can't be unspoken. Even if you delete a hastily fired off blog or tweet, it will probably already have been read and will be indexed or duplicated in places beyond your reach.
  - 1.4 Remember that the laws of defamation and harassment apply to social media in the same way as written or spoken communication and people can sue you personally for damages if they consider their reputation has been or may be harmed, or if your posts constitute harassment.
  - 1.5 Use of social media (whether personal or corporate account use) to bully or harass customers or colleagues will not be tolerated.
- 2 Use of Social Media at work**
  - 2.1 When using any Official Site in relation to your role at work, Authorised Users must:
    - Clearly identify yourself as a Council employee and either include your name or job title as and are making comments on a social media site not specifically branded as belonging to the Council.
    - Make sure all content published is accurate, not misleading and complies with any relevant Council policy and is in keeping with your job role.
    - Comply with the terms and conditions of the social media site being used.
    - Be polite and treat other users of the social media site with respect.
    - Use the flowchart at the end of this guide to decide how and if to respond to customer comments, particularly negative ones.
    - Remember to keep the Town Clerk (or Chairman of the Council) updated on your work and to flag inappropriate content.
  - 2.2 When using any Official Site, Authorised Users must not:
    - Make any comment or post any material that may cause damage to the Council's reputation or bring it into disrepute. This includes making negative or disparaging comments about the Council or its employees and ensuring you do not agree with or affirm content posted by third parties which is inappropriate (derogatory/offensive etc. see final point below), particularly where the accuracy of comments stated as factual cannot be verified.
    - Make any political comment; state any political preference or make any kind of partisan comment (e.g. show support/sympathy for) that may compromise the reputation of the Council or appear to put the Council in a conflict of interest.
    - Post, publish or respond to any material that is defamatory, offensive, obscene, harassing or bullying; racist, sexist or otherwise discriminatory; infringes copyright or any person's right to privacy; constitutes contempt of

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court or is otherwise unlawful.

### **3 Monitoring use of social media at work**

- 3.1 Authorised Users should not spend more time using social media sites in the course of their employment than is necessary for the purposes of Council public communication. Priority should be given to sites which are widely read by the general public and communicate information about services or service changes that relate to key Council proposals or affect significant numbers of residents. They should ensure that the use of social media does not interfere with their other duties. Authorised Users spending an unnecessary or excessive amount of time using social media sites may be subject to disciplinary action.

### **4 Open Access Editable “Wiki” Sites Such As Wikipedia**

- 4.1 Most Wiki sites record the IP address of the editing computer. Alterations to such wiki sites may appear as if they have come from the Council itself. Officers should not act in a manner that may bring the Council into disrepute and should not post derogatory or offensive comments on any online wiki sites.
- 4.2 Prior to altering any wiki site entry about the Council or any entry which might be deemed a conflict of interest, employees should read the terms and conditions of the site concerned and, if necessary, ask permission from the relevant wiki editor.

### **5 Personal use of social media**

- 5.1 Access to social media sites for personal use using the Council's IT systems is not allowed.
- 5.2 Employees should be aware and recognise that there is a risk of damage being caused to the Council through their personal use of social media when they can be identified as an employee of the Council. This may be by direct identification (because a profile or content expressly states a Council association) or indirect identification (because friends, family or others know the user works for the Council).
- 5.3 If in respect of any personal use of social media an employee can be identified as associated with the Council by the profile or content then the following guidance should be complied with:

#### **You should:**

- Expressly state (through a disclaimer) on any profile or content that identifies you as an employee (or otherwise refers to or implies a relationship with the Council) that the stated views are your own personal views and are not those of the Council. You can use something like ‘the views I express here are mine alone and do not reflect the views of my employer’ or ‘all tweets personal’.
- Ensure that readers are not misled into believing that any material published by you is on behalf of the Council, authorised by the Council or

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official Council policy if it is not.

- Ensure all content that relates to the Council or Council business is accurate, fairly balanced, not misleading and complies with any relevant Council policy.
- Comply with the terms and conditions of the social media site being used.
- Be polite and treat other users of the social media site with respect.
- Tell the Town Clerk (or the Chairman of the Council) if you discover defamatory, confidential, obscene or otherwise unlawful material that you consider affects the Council or any of its employees.

**In addition, you must not:**

- Publish content using an affiliation with the Council for the promotion of personal financial interests, personal commercial ventures or personal campaigns.
- Publish content in an abusive manner or in a way that contravenes the Council's Acceptable Behaviour Policy.
- Publish content in a way which appears as if the Council has endorsed it.
- Share sensitive or confidential information about the Council or its employees or Councillors nor upload any photos or videos of colleagues without their express permission.
- Use your Council email address or any Council logos or copyright material for personal use.

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### Appendix C

#### Guidance for Councillors (this guidance forms part of the Council's Media and Communications Policy)

##### 1 What to bear in mind

- 1.1 When you engage online it is important to use your common sense. The things that can get you into difficulties anywhere else are just the same things to avoid in social media.
- 1.2 You are personally responsible for what you publish on social media as well as in public statements. It is important that you think before you publish as words can't be unspoken. Even if you delete a hastily fired off blog or tweet, it will probably already have been read and will be indexed or duplicated in places beyond your reach.
- 1.3 Remember that the law of defamation applies to social media in the same way as written or spoken communication and people can sue you for damages if they consider their reputation has been or may be harmed.
- 1.4 Be mindful if using social media during an official Council meeting or event that the use does not negatively impact on the proceedings or contravene the Council's protocol.
- 1.5 At all times, whether posting in a personal or professional capacity, councillors must be clear whether they are writing as an elected member or private individual. Including 'Cllr' or 'Councillor' in a name is taken to mean that the councillor is writing in the capacity as an elected member. Councillor profiles, websites and use of social media should clearly be either 1) private and personal or 2) in their capacity as a councillor. This is particularly important as mixing these uses is likely to cause confusion to the electorate.

##### 2 Members' Code of Conduct

- 2.1 This applies to your online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. You should comply with the general principles of the Code in what you publish and what you allow others to publish.
- 2.2 You will need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the code and their practical application:
  - Treat others with respect. Avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
  - Avoid conducting yourself in a manner or behaving in such a way so as to give a reasonable person the impression you have brought your office or the Council into disrepute.
  - Comply with equality laws. Take care not to publish anything that might be considered as sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith.
  - Refrain from publishing anything which is confidential or breaches the Data Protection Act.
  - Ensure that readers are not misled into believing that any material published by you is on behalf of the Council, authorised by the Council or official Council policy if it is not.
  - Ensure all content that relates to the Council or Council business is accurate,

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fairly balanced, not misleading and complies with any relevant Council policy.

- Comply with the terms and conditions of the social media site being used.

2.3 Members of the public (or other Members or Officers) may make a complaint about you if you contravene the Code of Conduct.

2.4 Members should be aware that during the election process in order to comply with legislation they must not promote themselves on the corporate sites.

### 3 Personal use of social media

3.1 Councillors should be aware and recognise that there is a risk of damage being caused to the Council via their personal use of social media when they can be identified as an elected Councillor. This may be by direct identification (because a profile or content expressly states a Council association) or indirect identification (because friends, family or others know the user works for the Council).

3.2 If in respect of any personal use of social media a Councillor can be identified as associated with the Council by the profile or content, then the following guidance should be complied with:

#### **You should:**

- Expressly state (through a prominent disclaimer) on any profile or content that identifies you as a Councillor (or otherwise refers to or implies a relationship with the Council) that the stated views are your own personal views and are not those of the Council.
- Ensure that readers are not misled into believing that any material published by you is on behalf of the Council, authorised by the Council or official Council policy if it is not.
- Ensure all content that relates to the Council or Council business is accurate, fairly balanced, not misleading and complies with any relevant Council policy.
- Comply with the terms and conditions of the social media site being used.

In addition, you must not:

- Make any comment or post material so as to give a reasonable person the impression that you have brought your office as Councillor or the Council into disrepute.
- Present political or personal opinion as fact or as representative of the Council.
- Imply that you are authorised to speak as a representative of the Council nor give the impression that the views you express are those of the Council.
- Post or publish any material that is harassing or bullying. Harassment may include personal attacks on officers.
- Publish content that promotes personal/family interests, personal financial interests or any personal commercial ventures.
- Publish content in a way which appears as if the Council has endorsed it.
- Publish content in an abusive manner or contravenes the Council's Standing Orders and Code of Conduct.

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- Disclose confidential information, including matters considered under Part B of any Council meeting. If you are in any doubt about this you should first speak to the Town Clerk.

### 4 **Open Access Editable “Wiki” Sites Such As Wikipedia**

4.1 Most wiki sites record the IP address of the editing computer. Alterations to such wiki sites may appear as if they have come from the Council itself. You should not act in a manner that may bring the Council into disrepute and should not post derogatory or offensive comments on any online wiki sites.

4.2 Prior to altering any wiki site entry about the Council or any entry which might be deemed a conflict of interest, you should read the terms and conditions of the site concerned and, if necessary, ask permission from the relevant wiki editor.

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## Appendix D

### Response Flow Chart for Officers and Councillors

#### Social Media: Quick Guide for Responding

