

ETON TOWN COUNCIL



Council Offices
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Email Guidance

1. Why guidance?

The aim is for us to use email more efficiently and ensure that emails are written with propriety and show the courtesy and respect that should be accorded to fellow councillors and the Town Clerk.

2. The nature of email

Email is in some senses more permanent than a written letter, but it can be sent so quickly that it may not leave time for the reflection that the writing process allows. The same law applies to e-mail as to any other written communications and so we must be aware of the risk of defamation. Email is more like an old-fashioned postcard and less like a letter because messages can end up being seen by many more people than might be anticipated.

3. Is your e-mail really necessary?

It is useful to distinguish between "*action recipients*", who need to do something about an e-mail and who appear in the **To** list, and "*information recipients*" who appear in the **CC** list. It may help that when the Clerk sends out an email, s/he can make it clear in the title whether the matter is **For Information** (no reply needed or expected, not even a 'Thank you') or **For decision** (reply needed so that an action can be agreed by a majority of councillors). In the latter case it is appropriate for all of us to **reply to all** and share our individual decisions with each other.

Please note that our Standing Orders state that 'there shall be no discussion about the draft minutes of the preceding meeting except in relation to their accuracy and this shall be at the next Council meeting.'

4. Confidentiality and other legal aspects (FOI & GDPR)

The same law applies to e-mail as to any other written communications. Harassing and defamatory remarks are unacceptable. Our code of conduct is clear about the need for councillors to communicate in a respectful tone and a discourteous and adversarial tone is always unwarranted.

The Town Clerk is our employee and we should not expect him to reply to emails out of normal office hours or at weekends. If there is an emergency which must be dealt with, then telephone is probably best.

Hectoring emails which are critical of the Town Clerk are not acceptable and are likely to be seen as harassment (the first time) or bullying (thereafter). If there are ever complaints to be made about the conduct of the Town Clerk then they should be made to the Mayor who will investigate and deal with any concerns in line with HR best practice. Councillors should be aware that **CC'ing** can be taken as a form of intimidation or bullying when used inappropriately.

Before forwarding an e-mail which contains sensitive information, or a personal opinion, ask the original sender first. (It is worth reading the disclaimer small print attached to the bottom of incoming emails.) Also, we must be aware of forwarding on the email addresses of members of the public or traders/suppliers because they may well not want their e-mail address or message to the council shared.

Our e-mails to external addressees contain a disclaimer, but we should in any case phrase emails so that it is clear when one is expressing a personal view rather than something which may be taken as Council policy.

As Councillors we should be aware that all our emails (including those from personal email accounts) are open to scrutiny and may be subject to a freedom of information (FOI) request. We should always be circumspect when writing emails and expressing opinions.

Similarly, we need to be aware of our need to comply with GDPR.

5. Addressees & who to Copy?

All Councillors should be used when everyone needs to know what is going on, but **never** as a way of having (or continuing) a public argument or broadcasting it.

The correct place for most discussion, debate and argument is in the Council Chamber in a public forum and regulated by our Standing Orders.

Similarly, colleagues should check carefully before they use the **reply to all** function, judging whether others who have been included actually need to see the reply.

For reasons of confidentiality, members of the public should not be routinely included in the circulation lists of emails which are circulated to Councillors. It is usually good practice to send emails to members of the public on a separate email.

George Fussey
Chairman
Eton Town Council

October 1st 2020