



PRESS AND MEDIA POLICY

Adopted 31/07/18

Updated 09/05/19

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to deal with issues that may arise when dealing with the media.

KEYS AIMS

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media (press, radio, TV, internet) are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.

It is important that the press have access to the Clerk/ Members and to background information to assist them in giving accurate information to the public. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

This policy is subject to the Council's statutory obligations set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Council's Standing Orders. The Council must also have regard to the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and appropriate action taken.

When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from the Council's solicitor before any response is made.

There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Member contact details are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.

When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk, Chairman (in consultation with the Clerk) or the Chairman of Committees (in consultation with the Clerk) are authorised to make contact with the media. Statements made by the Clerk, Chairman or the Chairman of Committees should reflect the Council's opinion.

Other Councillors can talk to the media but should be aware that according to case law the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual and therefore must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council.

Reporters should be directed to contact the Clerk if they want to carry out an interview or obtain a statement about the Council's business and actions.

There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter or statement, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. Such letters and statements should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.

ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.

The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

Any filming or taping of Council proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Clerk and Chairman of the meeting (see Standing Orders).

PRESS RELEASES

The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of the Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the legal framework outlined previously is adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES TO BE OBSERVED BY COUNCILLORS AND STAFF

- Be informed and certain of all your facts
- Ensure that when making comments on behalf of the Council that you are aware what Council Policy is and that your comments reflect that policy
- Ensure that your comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or staff, into disrepute and ensure that comments are neither libellous nor slanderous.
- Any publicity should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both
- Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council should be handled with particular care.
- Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although facts, issues or arguments should not be oversimplified
- Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards
- Public funds must not be used to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.
- Council resources must not be used on publicity that is, or could be misinterpreted as being, party political or on publicity which could be seen as promoting an individual member, particularly at election times.
- The Council, its Councillors and Staff cannot disclose information which is confidential or where disclosure of information is prohibited by law.
- Councillors must act with integrity and observe the Members' Code of Conduct at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the Council.
- Councillors and staff must not communicate their personal views about the Council's business, decisions and actions.
- Councillors and Staff are not permitted to misrepresent the corporate position and views of the Council or damage the reputation of others in the Council, or the Council itself.

- If expressing personal views in their private capacity, Councillors are not permitted to use their title "Councillor" and staff are not permitted to use their job title. This would imply that you are stating Council policy.
- A copy of any written material sent to the Press and/or Media by a Councillor, as representing the Council, must be forwarded to the Clerk.
- A Councillor or Officer must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the Press on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on the Council's or Committee's agenda or at any other private briefing.
- A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an officer at meetings held in public or before the Press.