



MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Approved by Finance & General Purposes Committee: 21st September 2020

Minute No. F 1008 refers

Policy Review Date: April 2022

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with journalistic and social media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council media publicity.
- 1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with the media. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

2 KEYS AIMS

- 2.1 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, social, 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.
- 2.2 The journalistic media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to officers and members and to background information to assist them in this role. 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.

3**THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

- 3.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy:-
- "Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims [and the provision of services] 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 councils should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments."
 - "Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards."
 - "... local authorities... should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy."
- 3.2 In particular, officers and members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with and through media channels.
- 3.3 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 take appropriate action.
- 3.4 When the journalistic 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.
- 3.5 There are a number of personal privacy issues for officers 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 Town Clerk before any response is made to the media or through social media.

4**CONTACT WITH THE JOURNALISTIC MEDIA**

- 4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Town Clerk is usually the main contact with permission to speak to the media. The Town Mayor and the

Chairmen of Committees, by the nature of their position are also authorised contacts with the media in consultation with the Town Clerk.

- 4.2 Statements made by the Town Mayor or the Chairmen of Committees should reflect the Council's opinion and set policies.
- 4.3 If other councillors are contacted directly by the media for comment, they should liaise with the Town Clerk before responding to the request.
- 4.4 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council, preferably by confirming with the Town Clerk beforehand.
- 4.5 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. However, such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks.
- 4.6 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Town Mayor or the Chairmen of Committees or the Town Clerk. Other members are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the Local Press as a means of expressing their personal views.
- 4.7 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

5 ATTENDANCE OF JOURNALISTIC MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, five working days prior to the meeting.
- 5.2 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.
- 5.3 Any filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media can only be done with the express permission of the Town Clerk and Chairman of the particular meeting.

6 SOCIAL MEDIA

- 6.1 The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables the Parish/Town Council to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves.
- 6.2 The Council has a website, Facebook page, Twitter account and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of

communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers.

- 6.3 The Council uses the Facebook pages and Twitter account to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within the town and promote our community positively.
- 6.4 Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:
- Be civil, tasteful and relevant;
 - Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
 - Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
 - Not contain any personal information.
 - If it is official Council business it will be moderated by either the Town Mayor/Deputy Town Mayor or the Town Clerk;
 - Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.
- 6.5 In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives all communications should follow these guidelines:
- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
 - Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
 - Share freely and be generous with official Council posts, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
 - Stay on topic.
 - Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page or Twitter site for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.
- 6.6 Social media is not monitored 24/7 and we will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. Please do not include personal/private information in your social media posts to us. Sending a message/post via Facebook or Twitter will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Town Clerk and/or members of the council by emailing.
- 6.7 We retain the right to remove comments or content that includes:
- Obscene or racist content
 - Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
 - Potentially libellous statements.

- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page. The Council may post a statement that '*A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed*'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

7 TOWN COUNCIL WEBSITE

- 7.1 Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.
- 7.2 The Council may, at its discretion, allow and enable approved local groups to have and maintain a presence on its website for the purpose of presenting information about the group's activities. The local group would be responsible for maintaining the content and ensuring that it meets the Council's 'rules and expectation' for the web site. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the web site if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's 'rules and expectation' for its website. Where content on the website is maintained by a local group it should be clearly marked that such content is not the direct responsibility of the Council.

8 TOWN COUNCIL EMAIL AND OTHER DIRECTED COMMUNICATIONS

- 8.1 The Town Clerk has his/her own council email address (clerk's email address). The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message should be used when appropriate.

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk. All new emails requiring data to be passed on, will be followed up with a Data consent form for completion before action is taken with that correspondence.

- 8.2 Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. NB any emails copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act.

These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

- 8.3 Users must not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and other personal identifiers.
- 8.4 All are reminded that this policy also applies to SMS, Video conferencing and all other modes of directed communication including those that may emerge as the council seeks to serve the community more effectively.

9 ELECTIONS

- 9.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Members and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that Council resources should not be used on publicising individual members unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the Council. These extracts from the Code illustrate the main points:

- Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the council (for example, Town Mayor or Chairman of a committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and ... personalisation of issues or personal images making should be avoided."
- "Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor which are relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward their justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals."
- "The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.

- 9.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for

election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the Council. In this situation, members holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

10 PRESS RELEASES

- 10.1 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 all officers and members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 10.2 All press releases are to be factual, non-political, not written to cause offence and must be in accordance with Council policy.
- 10.3 All press releases are to be drafted and issued by the Town Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored, having consulted with the Town Mayor or Chairman of the relevant committee on the proposed wording.

This policy will be updated in 2 years' time but if changes are identified as being necessary or desirable prior to the next review date then the policy will be reviewed again by the Finance and General Purposes committee.