

PRESS AND MEDIA POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 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.

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, radio, TV, and social media – 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 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.”

Furthermore the Local Government Transparency Code (2014) requires Councils to operate a culture of transparency making information widely available to all that want to access and use it. This includes media organisations and those wishing to reuse the information for that purpose.

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 the media.

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 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 Clerk before any response is made to the media.

4. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk is usually the main contact with permission to speak to the media. The Chairman of the Council, by the nature of their position are also authorised contacts with the media in consultation with the Clerk.

4.2 Statements made by the chairman 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 Clerk before responding to the request.

4.4 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.

4.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Chairman or the Clerk. Councillors are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the Local Press as a means of expressing their personal views.

4.6 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

5 ATTENDANCE OF 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 Seating and workspace will be made available for members of the press that attend Council and Committee meetings.

5.3 Any filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media can only be done with the express permission of the Clerk and Chairman of the particular meeting.

6 ELECTIONS

6.1 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 Chairman of a committee or working party), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors’ proposals, decisions and recommendations. 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.

6.2 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.

7 PRESS RELEASES

7.1 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.

7.2 All press releases are to be factual, non-political, not written to cause offence and must be in accordance with Council policy.

7.3 All press releases are to be drafted and issued by the 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 Chairman of the relevant committee on the proposed wording.

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