



Odiham
Parish Council

**MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY
AND
COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES**

Adopted on 6 October 2014

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Odiham Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media. The purpose of this policy is to define roles and responsibilities for managing communication between the Council and the media. It will also assist the media by clarifying the mechanism for provision of information and responses to enquiries.

1.2 The intention of this policy is to adopt a framework for maintaining an effective working relationship with the media, based on coherent, professional, accurate and reliable presentation of information.

1.3 A separate policy covers the use of social media.

2. KEY 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 are important in conveying information to the community. The Council must therefore maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with the media 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 It is important that the media have access to the Executive Officer, Councillors and to background information to assist them to properly inform the public of all the relevant facts. 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.

2.3 The key aims of this policy are to work with the media to:-

- build a relationship of trust and mutual understanding;
- explain the Council's policies and services to the local community;
- communicate important public information messages;
- encourage local democracy and enable people to participate in the work of the Council;
- enhance the reputation of the Council.

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, in particular:-

- "Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims 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 Other guidelines are available, in particular the Institute of Public Relations Code of Conduct, which outlines the principles of good practice in the field of public relations.

4. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 The Executive Officer and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

4.2 Confidential documents, reports and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the media without prior Council approval. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will, if necessary, be undertaken as directed by the Council to establish responsibility and appropriate action taken.

4.3 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.

4.4 The Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires that local authorities produce a publication scheme specifying the information that the authority publishes or intends to publish. The publication scheme will be of direct relevance to the media by providing a clear picture of what is available when they are seeking information on behalf of the public.

4.5 The Council reserves the right to withhold certain sensitive information concerning commercial transactions, for example contracts or the purchase and sale of land and property. This applies to the Council's own commercial interests and to the various parties involved in individual business transactions with the Council. This area and other matters are guided by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Data Protection Act 1998 and exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

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

4.7 When responding to approaches from the media or outside bodies, the Executive Officer, Chairman or the Chair of Committees are authorised to make contact with the media and outside bodies.

4.8 Statements made by the Chairman, Chair of Committees and the Executive Officer should reflect the Council's opinion only.

4.9 Other Councillors may communicate with the media and outside bodies but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council.

4.10 There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit correspondence, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in communication submitted by other correspondents. Such correspondence should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must be issued by the Executive Officer.

4.11 Reports for the monthly Parish News shall be written by the Executive Officer and approved by the Chairman or Vice-Chair.

5. ATTENDANCE OF THE MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request. In practice, Odiham Parish Council provides agendas for all Council meetings to the local press.

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

5.3 Any filming and taping of Council proceedings by the media are covered under Standing Order 1 (L) and the approved Protocol for Public and Press Reporting at Council meetings.

5.4 In common with all Councils, certain agenda items are debated in a closed session of the meeting. The guidelines for which items will be heard in closed session are covered by the Local Government Act

1972 and the Councils Standing Orders. The Council may be approached for comment on items discussed during closed session. However, they must continue to respect the confidentiality issues referred to in section 4 of this policy.

6. GUIDANCE FOR COUNCILLORS

6.1 If appropriate, for a specific issue, the Chairman may authorise another Councillor to make a statement on behalf of the Council.

6.2 All media comments must accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.

6.3 All decisions of the Council, made in an open meeting, can be quoted and made available to the media.

6.4 The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able to speak with some authority, using plain English.

6.5 Councillors should not make "personal comments" which could damage the reputation of the Council or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the Council or other members.

6.6 Councillors wishing to make a "personal statement" to the media must clearly inform the media:

- that their comment is made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of the Council;
- that other Councillors may hold a different view;
- that the matter may still to be discussed or resolved by the Council.

6.7 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, member of the Executive or Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual Councillor's 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 image 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 her/his position and responsibilities within the Council, and to put forward her/his 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."

6.8 Odiham Parish Council has adopted the statutory Code of Conduct for members, the objective of which is to enhance and maintain standards of personal conduct and the integrity of the Council.

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 Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

7.2 The Executive Officer or any Councillor may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Executive Officer in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to and that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of press releases can be monitored.

8. TONE OF VOICE

8.1 In some ways the tone of voice of the written document is even more important than the tone of voice of something that is spoken because once something is written down and published correction is a longer process. It follows that even greater care is needed in written documentation than when speaking.

8.2 Bearing in mind the position of the Parish Council within our community, our responsibilities to our electors and to the even wider community outside our written communications are:

- Authoritative without being authoritarian;
- Communicative without being irresponsible;
- Approachable without being "matey";
- Accurate in terms of grammar spelling and phraseology without being old fashioned;
- Concise without being economical with the truth;
- Considered without withholding essential information;
- Friendly without being casual;

9. NOTICES

9.1 The Council's website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Executive Officer.

9.2 The Council's noticeboards and website will be used for the advertising of agendas and other Council information.

9.3 The Council's Facebook page will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly.

10. DATE OF REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed annually.