

Chatteris Town Council

Press and Social Media Guidance & 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 also gives guidance on how to use social media without breaking the Code of Conduct.
- 1.3 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 press and using 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 – 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, priorities and decisions.
- 2.2 It is important that the press have access to the Clerk and 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.

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.
- 3.2 The Town Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

4 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

- 4.1 The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- 4.2 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 will be 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 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 and 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.
- 4.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk and Mayor are authorised to make contact with the media. In specific cases the Town Clerk and/or Mayor may authorise other Members to respond to media requests.
- 4.6 Statements made by the Town Mayor and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion.
- 4.7 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. Such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and other correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.
- 4.8 Should a Member decide to submit a letter to the press on any subject they should not use the term 'Town Councillor' or give the impression, directly or implied, that they are writing on behalf of the Council. They should also be mindful when composing the letter that they are likely to be known as a councillor and should take care with the content.

5 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.
- 5.2 Under Standing Order 1 1) The press shall be provided with reasonable facilities for the taking of their report of all or part of a meeting at which they are entitled to be present.
- 5.3 Under the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 Councils are required to allow any member of the public to take photographs, film and audio-record the proceedings and report on all public meetings. It is advisable that any person (including representatives of the media) wishing to film or audio-record give the Clerk/Mayor reasonable notice before the meeting commences so that suitable arrangements can be made to facilitate the request.

6 PRESS RELEASES

- 6.1 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 the Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

- 6.2 All press releases must be issued by the Clerk to ensure that the principles outlined in 3 (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.

7 SOCIAL MEDIA – USE BY THE COUNCIL

- 7.1 Social media offers a range of opportunities for local councils to use the internet to communicate and engage with local residents. Social media can improve communication with residents, increase participation in the work of the Council and help Councils to be more open, transparent and collaborative.
- 7.2 Social media also provides a fantastic way of promoting what the Council is doing – such as running community events.

8 SOCIAL MEDIA – USE BY COUNCILLORS

- 8.1 When using social media sites Councillors should not use the term Councillor or give the impression, directly or implied, that they are writing on behalf of the Council.
- 8.2 Members should, however, be mindful of the fact that they are a Councillor and The Code of Conduct. The Code states that: ‘A member must not in his official capacity, or any other circumstance, conduct himself in a Manner which could be reasonably be regarded as bringing his office or authority into disrepute.’ Members should, therefore, not post any comment or image which could bring the Council into disrepute.

9 STAYING SAFE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

- 9.1 The Society of Local Council Clerks offers the following tips for staying safe on social media.
- 9.2 Relentless Positivity – If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.
- 9.3 Don’t get involved in endless debates – Make your point once, clearly. Follow up if you really need to but don’t keep coming back over and over again.
- 9.4 Ignore/block/report – Ignore abuse if you can. You could also block the person responsible or report it to the site owners.
- 9.5 If you have to think about it, don’t do it.
- 9.6 If someone posts something that is not true you can correct it but try to take a conciliatory tone when doing so.
- 9.7 If someone is critical of either a council policy or a service, and expresses themselves in a polite way, ensure you are gracious and polite in response and try to turn the criticism into something positive.
- 9.8 Do not feed mindless trolls. Give the Council’s position once and then leave it, do not get dragged into an ongoing debate.

AGREED By Chatteris Town Council: 6/10/15