



MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

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Next review to take place council year 2027-28 or earlier if so desired.



1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Councillors involved in dealing with the media and other forms of public communication and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest and manage day to day relationships with the press. It is also to ensure that the Parish Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner.
- 1.2 This policy does not seek to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations on Parish Councillors in their private capacity but does provide advice and guidance on their sensible use of conventional and social media. Rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving effective communication with the public and relationships with the media.

2. Key Aims

- 2.1 The Council welcomes the opportunity to engage with local organisations and the media and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media – social media, press, radio, TV, internet and other public facing information – 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.

Through this policy the Council aims to:

- Be recognised by the public as a Council which is open, accountable, accessible and willing to listen;
 - Find opportunities to share and celebrate the Parish Council's successes;
 - Ensure information is provided about policies and services as well as the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Parish Council and its work;
 - Communicate public facing information in an accessible way
 - Ensure negative issues are handled clearly and decisively.
- 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 (and Holme Valley Parish Council adopted the Code on 2 August 2011 – Minute 11 13(1) refers).

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 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 in accordance with the Standing Orders and Code of Conduct adopted by the Council.
- 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 in accordance with the Council’s policies on Freedom of Information and Data Protection, the latter having been amended following the implementation of the EU General Data Protection Regulations 2016/679. These issues 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. Social Media

- 4.1 Social media is a generic term for the sharing opinions, discussions, stories, video, pictures and information electronically. The key feature of such systems is that they enable users to interact with each other rapidly online and can be accessed in different ways – via computers, tablets and phones.

Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn and Instagram. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

Members and Officers are at liberty to set up personal accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Parish Council’s view.

Members and Officers should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language.

- 4.2 Social media can be used by the Parish Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.



The aim of this part of the policy is to ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Parish Council-based services through the use of social media;
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media;
- That Parish Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media;
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation;
- That the Parish Council is not brought into disrepute.
- Social media activity isn't something that stands alone. To be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be included in social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

4.3 It is acknowledged that there is significant potential for using social media and that this can bring great advantages. The responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged and every effort will be made to ensure content is accessible. Social media may be used to:

- Distribute agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Publish good news stories linked to website or press pages
- Advertise vacancies
- Share information from partner agencies such as Kirklees Council, the Police, Library/Tourist Information, transport, health etc.
- Announce new information
- Post or share information from other community groups such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities
- Refer resident queries to the Clerk and all other councillors

Social Media may not be used to:

- Promote or criticise any activity that appears to affect public support for any political party
- Advertise on behalf of private for-profit business
- Promote any activity on behalf of member or officer's private interests that are not in the wider public interest

4.4 Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the Parish Council or its business, not bring it into disrepute or otherwise violate any Parish Council policies.

The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration. The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication.

The following guidelines will apply to all online participation by officers and members:

- Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media; publishing – or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) – an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may amount to libel.
- Never give out other people's personal details such as home address and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with GDPR; this may also include images or content that could infringe the copyright of others, images posted without permission or images of minors with parental permission.



- Members and Officers must be aware of their own safety when placing information on the Internet and should not publish information which could give details which could leave them vulnerable.
- Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Parish Council. Avoid use of the Parish Council e-mail address, logos or other Parish Council identification. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only. Where possible, you should include a standard disclaimer, such as: "Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the council's policies or opinions"; Never hide your identity using false names or pseudonyms.
- Know your obligations: you must comply with other Parish Council policies when using social media; For example, you should be careful not to breach Parish Council confidentiality and proprietary information policies;
- Members and Officers must treat others with respect, avoid personal attacks and not make disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
- Any Member or Officer receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the Parish Clerk and/or the police. Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate councillors, volunteers, Council staff or residents should report them to the Clerk.

Misuse of social media content by councillors, employees or volunteers, that is contrary to this and other policies, could result in action being taken by the Council.

The Clerks will have authority to remove from Council social media pages any posts made by third parties which are deemed to be of a defamatory or libellous nature.

5. Contact with the Media

- 5.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Chair of the Council should be the authorised contact with the media in consultation with the Clerk. However, if the subject of an enquiry relates to the work of one of the Council's Committees, the Chair of the Council may delegate the authorised contact role to the Chair of that Committee.
- 5.2 Statements made must reflect the Council's opinion.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 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.
- 5.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee. If individual Members choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.
- 5.6 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.



6. Attendance of Media at Council or Committee Meetings

- 6.1 Agendas and minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets together with dates of meetings being available on the Council's website.
- 6.2 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, prior to the meeting.
- 6.3 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.
- 6.4 Any filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Clerk and Chairman of the particular meeting.

7. Elections

7.1 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), 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."

7.2 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.

8. Press Releases and Publications

- 8.1 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 or providing content for an external publication may be beneficial.
- 8.2 Any Officer or Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerks following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee in order to ensure that the principles

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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.

9. Notices

- 9.1 The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Clerks.
- 9.2 The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of agendas, minutes and other Council information along with occasional matters of local interest and the latest news.
- 9.3 Every effort will be made to ensure notices are as accessible as possible.

10. Impartiality

- 10.1 The Council will in its communication aim to maintain a politically neutral position.

Whilst it is legitimate for the Council to publicise local issues, the Council will not involve itself in any publicity which appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party or the private interests of any individual or profit-making business.

Gemma Sharp
Assistant Clerk to the Council
July 2023