

WALTON PARISH COUNCIL

MEDIA AND PRESS POLICY

1. GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY

This policy is to guide both Councillors and Officers of the Council in their relations with the news media in such a way as to ensure the smooth running of the Council.

This policy does not seek to be comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some issues that may arise when dealing with news media organisations including press officers attending meetings.

The Council is accountable to the electorate for its actions and shall therefore be proactive in making all reasonable efforts to make its decisions and policies known to the electorate.

2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR OFFICERS AND MEMBERS

- 2.1 Officers and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media and should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Walton Parish Council.
- 2.2 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 take appropriate action in accordance with the Standing Orders and Code of Conduct adopted by the Council.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 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. 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 Parish Clerk before any response is made to the media.
- 2.5 Councillors should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer at meetings held in public or before the press.

3. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

- 3.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Chairman of the Council should be the authorized contact with the media in consultation with the Parish Clerk. However, if the subject of an enquiry relates to the work of one of the Council's Committees, the Chairman of the Council may delegate the authorized contact role to the Chairman of that Committee.
- 3.2 Statements made must reflect the Council's opinion.
- 3.3 Unless a Parish Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, Parish Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view. Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful about expressing individual views to the news media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business. Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made, while it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in an open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the news media.

- 3.4 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.
- 3.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee.
- 3.6 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

4 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

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

5 PRESS RELEASES

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 Any Officer or Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee.

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), 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, 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 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.

7 NOTICES

- 7.1 The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the authorised Councillor or Parish Clerk.
- 7.2 The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of agendas, minutes and other council information. If there is sufficient space, information from other bodies may be posted by an authorised member of the Council.

8. URGENT SITUATIONS

- 9.1 In the case of an urgent letter or press release being required in advance of a Council or Committee meeting, this may be issued by the Parish Clerk with the agreement of the Chairman of the Council or relevant Committee following circulation of a draft version to other Members for comment.
- 8.1 In the case of urgent actions being required in the absence of the Members and Officers with specific roles and responsibilities under this policy, the following delegations shall apply:
- a) the Vice Chairman of the Council may act in the absence of the Chairman;
 - b) the Vice Chairman of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chairman;

9. PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

- 9.1 The point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed.
- 9.2 The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- 9.3 No individual Parish Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council (or its committees/sub-committees). In particular Parish Councillors do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a “need to know”
- 9.4 All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Parish Council, using Council letter-headed paper.
- 9.5 Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

10. PARISH COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES

- 10.1 The Clerk sends out the Council’s correspondence to other bodies and correspondence from individual Parish Councillors should be avoided; however, there may be exceptional situations when it is appropriate for a Parish Councillor to issue correspondence in his/her own name. Such correspondence must be authorised by the Parish Council and the correspondence must make it clear that it has been written in an official capacity and has been authorised.