



WOMBOURNE PARISH COUNCIL

MEDIA/PRESS POLICY

Introduction

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.

Wombourne Parish Council is committed to the provision of accurate information about its governance, decisions and activities. Where this information is not available via the Council's publication scheme, please contact the Parish Clerk.

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 media.

Key aims

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communication. The media, be it the press, radio, TV or 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 the explain the reasons for particular policies and/or priorities.

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.

The Legal Framework

This policy is subject to the Council's obligations which are set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018, other legislation which may apply and the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations.

The Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations referenced in this policy are available via the Council's publication scheme.

The Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Council's Standing Orders, under contract or by common law.

Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the code of conduct adopted by the Council, a copy of which is available via the Council's publication scheme.

Contact with the media

The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

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 taken.

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 or legal representatives before any response is made.

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 addresses and telephone numbers (although Member contact details are already in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long term sickness absences that are affecting service provision(s). On all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.

When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk, Chairman or the Chairman of Committees are authorised to make contact with the media.

Statements made by the Chairman or the Chairman of Committees and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion.

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.

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 correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.

Attendance of media at Council meetings

A meeting of the Council and its Committees is open to the public unless the meeting resolves to exclude them because their presence at the meeting is prejudicial to the public interest due to the confidential nature of the business or other special reason(s) stated in the resolution. In accordance with the Council's Standing Orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting of the Council and its Committees, if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.

Where a meeting of the Council and its Committees include an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Council's Standing Orders.

The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a meeting of the Council or its Committee's (which include using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV or radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums or social network sites such as Facebook or Twitter) which enable a person not at the meeting to see, hear or be given commentary about the meeting is permitted, unless i. the meeting has resolved to hold all or part of the meeting without the public present or ii. such activities disrupt the proceedings or iii. the two paragraphs below apply.

The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a child or vulnerable adult at a Council or Committee meeting is not permitted unless an adult responsible for them has given permission.

Oral reporting or commentary about a Council or Committee meeting by a person who is present is not permitted.

The Council shall, as far as it is practicable, provide reasonable facilities for anyone taking a report of a Council or Committee meeting.

Press releases

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 to the Council.

The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however, they must all be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in this policy are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

The Clerk will give permission on behalf of the Council for the press to publish any letter that may have been sent to an elector, where appropriate.

Other communications with the media

This policy does not seek to regulate Councillors in their private capacity.

The Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Council. If the views of Councillors are different to the Council's corporate position and views, they will make this clear.

The Parish Clerk may contact the media if the Council wants to provide information, a statement or other material about the Council.

Subject to the obligations on Councillors not to disclose information referred to in 'The Legal Framework' above, and not to misrepresent the Council's position, Councillors are free to communicate their position and views.