

MEDIA POLICY

1. Introduction

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 1998, other legislation which may apply and the Council's standing orders and financial regulations. The Council's financial regulations and relevant standing orders referenced in this policy are available via the Council's publication scheme.

Failure to follow the Parish Council's policy could lead to a breach of the Code and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Parish Council's reputation. Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to ensure that the messages put out by the Parish Council are consistent and accurate.

However, if communication is managed effectively, the Parish Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

The Parish Council throughout the year:

- receives enquiries from the media;
- issues news releases;
- organises photo opportunities;
- arranges interviews;
- produces its own newsletter within the local press.

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Members involved in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest. It is also to ensure that the Parish Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner.

This policy does not seek to regulate Parish Councillors in their private capacity but does provide advice and guidance on their sensible use of conventional and social media. The Parish Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Parish Council. If the views of Parish Councillors are different to the Parish Council's corporate position and views, they will make this clear. Subject to the obligations on Parish Councillors not to disclose information referred to in section 13 and not to misrepresent the Parish Council's position, Parish Councillors are free to communicate their position and views.

In all cases, the Parish Council's approach, in accordance with the Code, to the media should:

- be lawful;
- be cost effective;
- be objective;
- be even-handed;
- be appropriate;

- have regard to the Parish Council's Equality & Diversity Policy;
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

2. The Parish Council's approach to publicity

The media plays an important role in informing residents about what the Parish Council does and how it spends their money. It is therefore vital that the Parish Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible takes a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews so that:

- The Parish Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and willing to listen;
- There are opportunities to share and celebrate the Parish Council's successes;
- 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;
- Negative issues are handled clearly and decisively.

The main media are the local and regional press together with local radio and television stations. It is unlikely that Armthorpe Parish Council would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level but this policy is written to ensure that it is relevant to these cases should they occur.

It is also recognised that the internet is the fastest growing area of the media and that many broadcasters and newspapers include information on the villages.

3. Identifying Newsworthy Items

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Parish Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Parish Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk and Chairman to make the decision as to whether or not a press release should be issued.

4. Handling Media Enquiries

The Parish Clerk co-ordinates all media enquiries to the Parish Council. Members and Parish Council staff who are directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without establishing the full facts. If members are in any doubt they should consult the Parish Clerk. Parish Council staff should refer all media enquiries to the Parish Clerk in the first instance. The Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. The phrase "no comment" should not be used as a response to a media enquiry.

The Parish Council is open and accountable and should always try to explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

5. Press Releases

The use of press releases is a key technique for publicising Parish Council activities, decisions and achievements. An official Parish Council release is made on behalf of the Parish Council as a whole; it will be written and issued by the Parish Clerk and Chairman. Official Parish Council releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Parish Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Parish Councillor.

Parish Council press releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Parish Councillors, identify a Member's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view. All official Parish Council releases will be placed on the Parish Council's website within three working days of issue.

6. Interviews

Any member of staff or elected member who is contacted by a journalist requesting an interview in their capacity as a representative of the Parish Council should refer the matter to the Parish Clerk. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist. Officers should never give their opinion on specific Parish Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages, their role being to provide expertise and factual knowledge only in support of the Parish Council's approved and agreed policies.

7. Media Coverage of Meetings

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Parish Council meetings. During meetings Members and officers should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what may be a complex issue.

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

8. Publicity during Elections

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself ('purdah') all proactive publicity about candidates and other politicians is halted. This applies to scheduled local or national elections.

During this period Parish Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Parish Councillor gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required the relevant Officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this policy.

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature - and this includes web advertising. There are additional requirements, such as imprint standards, for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

Accounts may need to be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities. Parish Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Parish Council resources for inappropriate purposes. Any queries regarding publicity during a purdah period should always be referred to the Parish Clerk for further advice.

9. Non-Parish Council Related Media

Officers and Members of the Parish Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-Parish Council related organisations must not refer to their Parish Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Parish Council related organisation.

10. Managing Negative Issues

From time to time the Parish Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity. Members and Officers must alert the Parish Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest is known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media. Members and Officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Parish Council about an issue.

11. Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Parish Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the Parish Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who is the most appropriate person to take the agreed action. It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain; each case should be judged individually.

Occasionally the Parish Council will get something wrong. In these cases damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising and stating how the Parish Council will learn from the error or put it right.

12. Freedom of Information and Data Protection

Should the Parish Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt. The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.

In addition care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 1998 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents. The Parish Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The Parish Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Parish Council's standing orders, under contract or by common law.

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

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