

Sevington with Finberry Parish Council

Communication and Media Policy

Introduction

1. Sevington with Finberry Parish Council (“the council”) has adopted this policy for its interactions with the Press or other media (“the press”) in order to guide councillors and staff on what behaviour is authorised by the council.
2. This policy governs all contact or other interactions which are, or could be construed as being, conducted in the name of the council. It does not seek to prevent councillors acting as members of the public in a personal capacity, but this must be specifically in their own names, as individuals, without using their councillor titles, and clearly not offering any sort of indication of council thinking in the future.
3. In respect of council employees, relevant conditions in their contracts of employment may also apply.

General

4. The council will endeavour to provide accurate information with regard to its activities, either through its website, parish notice boards or on request to the clerk. Attention is drawn to the council’s publication scheme, on its website.
5. Certain information may not be made available where it is confidential, where its release would be premature, or if disclosure would be prohibited by legislation.
6. Questions from the press or requests for statements or interviews should be addressed to the clerk in the first instance, or in her absence to the Chairman.
7. All relations with the press on behalf of the council during the formal period of a full council election will be managed by the clerk.
8. When responding to requests for media comment, the council should, at all times, endeavour to best represent the views of local residents. These views could have been gathered formally at Parish Council meetings or informally through day to day conversations or local social media sites. As councillors are usually local residents themselves, it is natural that some personal opinions of councillors may be put forward, but they should be balanced and mindful of the general code of conduct expected of councillors in the execution of their duties. On potentially contentious topics, or where there is a divide in opinion of local residents on an issue, it is important to acknowledge such differences of opinion and strive for balance and even-handedness in any comments or press statements.

Press Releases

9. Any formal Press Release will be issued by the Clerk, or if she is unavailable, by the Chairman, in writing by hard copy or electronic media.
10. A formal Press Release must always be approved by councillors in advance, preferably in a council meeting, but if this is not possible owing to the timing of events, then by councillors in a process conducted by email. In the latter case, all councillors will be given the opportunity to respond, though time might be short, and a decision will be by consensus, if possible, or by following the same rules that apply at council meetings. A quorum is required (i.e. three or more responses).

11. The Clerk will assemble and periodically review a contact list of potential recipients for Press Releases, although issue of any particular Release might be restricted to a sample of it, depending on the relevance of the subject matter.

Questions Raised by Press or Media

12. Where enquiries are made of the Clerk by the press, the council's approach will depend on the deadline for a reply given by the journalist (or if not volunteered, then requested by the Clerk). Even if the deadline is not tight, the council will always seek to get its response in as early as possible, hoping to help shape the story rather than only as a rebuttal at the foot of possibly lengthy criticism.
13. The Clerk will always try to get the advice of the Chairman before responding, at which point it can be agreed who will make the response and in what form. If time permits, and/or the topic requires wider clarification of the council's position, then the Clerk or Chairman will endeavour to solicit opinions from other councillors before responding, but this will be a balance and is left to the discretion of the Clerk and/or Chairman.
14. Should an approach from the press come first to the Chairman, he will take an equivalent approach to paras. 11 & 12 above, unless the request is straightforward and the Chairman can respond in the knowledge of the council's position.
15. Wherever possible, a response to the press will always be made in writing (email) for the benefit of clarity and record-keeping, or confirmed in that way immediately afterwards. The journalist is very likely to take a recording of the conversation if it is given for use in the media.
16. Bear in mind that there is never any firm assurance of anything being "off the record".

Response to questions on incidents, e.g. traffic or other accidents.

17. It is sometimes necessary for these rules to be modified if a serious event has taken place in which the council or its staff is involved and the press have a legitimate interest in reporting a live story, as the council does not wish to appear overly-defensive or unconcerned about the consequences of what has happened.
18. In such a situation, staff are authorised to answer questions from the press about their particular knowledge of what happened and/or their part in it, but they must take care as to factual accuracy, avoidance of subjective matters of opinion, and giving full regard to the normal insurance requirement not to admit any liability on their own or the council's part.
19. Any involvement of a councillor in such an event is not generally a matter for the council unless it happened at a council meeting, since the councillor is otherwise only present at the event in a personal capacity.

14th September 2020