

Worldham Parish Council Press and Media Policy

Adopted: February 2021

Review due: May 2022

Press and Media Policy

Introduction

Worldham Parish Council welcomes enquiries from the Press and Media. The Council recognise a healthy relationship with the Press and Media in its important role in conveying information to the local community.

The following policy defines the roles and responsibilities within the Council to ensure that Worldham Parish Council communicate in a transparent and professional manner at all times.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations, rather, that it provides guidance on how to deal with media requests.

Legislation

This policy is subject to the Council's statutory obligations 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, the Openness of Local Government Regulations 2014 and Councils Standing Orders.

The Press and Media are permitted to attend all meetings of the Council and its committees unless legislation suggests otherwise.

Key Aims

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

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It is important that the press have access to the Clerk/ 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.

Roles & Responsibilities

The Clerk will act as the press officer and point of contact for Worldham Parish Council. The Clerk, as the Proper Officer of the Council, is authorised to receive all communications from the Press and Media and to issue Press Statements on behalf of the Council in consultation with the Chair. In the absence of the Clerk, media communications will be handled by the Chair, in consultation with the Vice-Chair

Any member or employee who is approached by the Press & Media for any matter relating Worldham Parish Council should direct the enquiry to the Clerk.

Members can make their own statements expressing their personal opinion relating to local issues. However, Members must make it clear that any opinion expressed is their own personal view, not that of the Council and should be recorded as such.

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 EDHC or the Council's solicitor before any response is made.

There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example, to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. Such letters should be kept brief and balanced. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.

All Freedom of Information requests must be referred to the Clerk. Members should be aware that any Council related information held on their personal devices can be the subject to such a request.

Statements made by the Chair or the Chair of Committees and the Clerk should reflect the Council's stated policy or opinion. They should not speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council.

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

Council business

Whilst it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that s/he voted against a policy if this took place in an open session, Councillors should not seek to undermine a decision through the Press.

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.

During an election year, the Clerk will not normally make any statement or issue a press release during Purdah (from the issue of the Notice of Election until the day following the election).

Attendance at Council Meetings

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.

The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

Meetings of the council, its committees and sub-committees are open to the public and press unless the Council resolves that their presence is prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted or for other special reasons. In accordance with standing orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.

Where meetings include time for public participation and subject to the Council's standing orders, media representatives may speak and ask questions. The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 has amended section 1 of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 to require Councils to permit any person (including the press) who attends a council (or committee) meeting to report on the proceedings of the meeting except where the Council has resolved to exclude the public. The new provisions address the existence of different means of reporting, including the use of social media. The "press" in the widest terms includes traditional print media, filming crews, hyperlocal journalists and bloggers.

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However, the Council is not required by the regulations to permit oral reporting or oral commentary on a meeting as it takes place if the person reporting or providing the commentary is present at the meeting (e.g. running a verbal commentary while filming) which could be disruptive.

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.

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 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.

Adopted 3rd February 2021