

Lyneham and Bradenstoke Parish Council

Press and Media Policy



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Adopted by Lyneham and Bradenstoke Parish Council

On

Xxxxxx 2020

To be reviewed annually



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Lyneham and Bradenstoke Parish Council (known as “the Council”) for working with the press and media (known as “the media”) and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with the media. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

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.

The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to Officers and Members and to background information to assist them in this role. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public is properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.



THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy: -

- “Any publicity describing the Council’s policies, aims and the provision of services should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both.”
- “Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council should be handled with particular care. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although councils should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments.”
- “Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.”
- “Local authorities should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”

Officers 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 take appropriate action in accordance with the Standing Orders and Code of Conduct adopted by the Council.



When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice must be taken from the Parish Clerk and/or the Council's solicitor before any response is made.

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 normally 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.

CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

When responding to approaches from the media, the Chairman of the Council will be the authorised 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 Councils Committees, the Chairman of the Council may delegate the authorised contact role to the Chairman of that Committee.

Statements made must reflect the Council's opinion.

Other Councillors may talk to the media but they must ensure it is made clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council.

Councillors should exercise caution 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.



If responding to public consultations that are in the public domain and can be viewed by the media, such as planning consultations, councillors may respond as individuals only. They are not to imply they are responding as a councillor and, where possible, should also state at the beginning of the consultation response that “I am responding to this consultation as an individual and not part of any other group or organisation that I belong to or am part of”.

Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Parish Clerk following an instruction by the Council or relevant Committee. If individual Members choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Parish Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.

At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Agendas and minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets, together with dates of meetings, via the Council’s website.

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

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

Members of the press and/or public are entitled to record parish meetings in accordance with the Local Government Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and Lyneham and Bradenstoke Parish Council’s Public Participation Policy.



ELECTIONS

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, and 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.”

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.



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 all Officers and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

Any Councillor may draft a press release, however, they must all be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee in order to ensure that the principles outlined in the Legal Framework section are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

NOTICES

The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Parish Clerk or delegated Member.

The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of agendas, minutes and other council information.

URGENT SITUATIONS

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 the circulation of a draft version to other Members for comment.

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-Chair of the Council may act in the absence of the Chairman;
- b) the Vice-Chair of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chairman and;
- c) the Parish Clerk may act in the absence of the Vice-Chair of the Council or a Committee.

If no delegated member is available the member must make it clear that they are not able to answer the question but would seek the right person to give a response, in due course. The member must not attempt to answer the question.

RISK FACTORS

All Members and Offices are reminded that they are not to make “Off Record” comments under any circumstances.

Members and Officers are reminded that where the Press and the Media are concerned there is no such thing as an “Off Record” comment, and in the past other Parish Councils have been badly damaged by “Off Record” comments being used in the press and media.

If a Member or an Officer is being interviewed as a private individual, and any subject comes up that relates to the Parish Council, the Member or Officer is to decline to answer and point them to the appropriate member of the Parish Council.

It is recommended that if being interviewed as a private individual, that unless directly asked they do not volunteer the information that they are a Member or Officer. If you do, there is a high risk the press and media will report any comment as coming directly from a Member or Officer.



NOTES

This policy has been derived from

- Local Government Acts 1986, 1988 and 1972
- Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (2011)
- The Localism Act 2011
- The Local Government Audit and Accountability Act 2014
- The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014
- Local Government Transparency Code 2014
- NALC Model Media Templates 2014
- Wiltshire Council Media and Press Policies