



Local Government for Langton Green, Speldhurst, Ashurst and Old Groombridge

MEDIA POLICY

Introduction

Speldhurst Parish Council's relationship with the community is vital to its work and the decisions it takes. An open and constructive dialogue is a key requirement for influencing and developing services, identifying attitudes and measuring satisfaction.

Effective media relations are an important factor in establishing a good relationship between the Parish Council and the community. Since members of the public generally rely on the media for local information and news, it is important for the Parish Council to present information about its activities and aspirations in a consistent way.

This document sets out the framework for Parish Council Members and employees to follow in contacting the media and informing the public about the Parish Council's activities, the decisions it takes and the services it provides.

The Media

The term "media" encompasses many different means of communicating a message to a wide audience, and includes broadcast media, the internet and a wide range of printed media, including local newspapers, magazines, local broadsheets, and posters.

The general principle is that the Parish Council office will act as the Press Office. Any official contact with the media concerning Parish Council's policies, decisions and services is to be initiated through this office.

Press releases and statements will be prepared by the Clerk in consultation with the Chair and other Councillors as required and will normally be restricted to matters that have been debated and agreed by the Parish Council.

All Members who are approached by the media should refer them to the Council Office to ensure consistency. Members can, as long as they make it clear that it is a personal opinion, state their view on a matter. However, Members should take care not to misrepresent and/or bring the Parish Council into disrepute and must bear in mind their responsibilities under the Local Government

Code of Conduct. The requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 and 2018 GDPR Act, must be adhered to at all times.

The Local Government Act (LGA) 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request and the media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and the Council should make appropriate space available. The Openness of LG Bodies Regulations 2014 became law on 6th August 2014, allowing filming, photographing and/or recording of Council proceedings by the public or press. The Chair of the meeting should ask if any person intends to do any of these so that Councillors are aware. This should be a constant agenda item on all Council or Committee meetings. No oral report or running verbal commentary is permitted during the meeting.

Notice Boards

Public notice is required of Parish Council meetings and its committee meetings. The LGA 1972 requires that at least three clear working days' notice be given and that the notice must be affixed in some conspicuous place in the locality (notice boards).

Village notice boards should also be updated regularly with information that is in the public interest for those residents who do not have access to the internet.

Website and Social Media

The Parish Council's website should be updated regularly by the Council Office with copies of minutes, agendas, policies and information useful to residents. Material published by the Council online must be objective, balanced and accurate. It will be regularly updated and will include links to other key partners. It is, however, not a legal requirement that this is done except for information that is required by law (e.g. the Annual Return). The website should be partially compliant with Accessibility regulations

Social media is a collective term for ways to create and publish on the internet and other forms of social communication such as Facebook or Twitter. It is clear that social networking sites can enhance debate and add positively to local issues when used correctly.

The Parish Council is active on Facebook, sharing information and news alerts from its own website, and re-posting information from other Facebook accounts and websites which are useful to residents. The council uses multi-media to engage with followers, including photos and videos and will be introducing an e-newsletter in due course.

Only those persons authorised by the Clerk are permitted to post material, or use the Council's logo, on social media websites in the Council's name and on its behalf. Any media communication will be compliant with GDPR.

Social media for Councillors

Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. For example, there are certain restrictions on using social media

websites for electoral campaigning and extra care also needs to be taken when writing on planning matters.

Councillors should remember that mentioning council-related matters on their private social media accounts may mean that the Councillors Code of Conduct can apply to all posts. Any form of communication carries with it the possibility of misunderstanding and social media is especially vulnerable to these problems. It is also important to remember that what is said on-line is permanently published. A comment which would be viewed as harmless or between friends could be seen as seriously offensive online. Posts can easily be misinterpreted and taken out of context as people viewing them may not be aware of the background of the issue being discussed.

Libel

If an untrue statement is published about a person that is damaging to that person's reputation they may take a libel action. This also applies if the Parish Council does not promptly remove known libellous comments on the website.

Copyright

Placing images or text on any of the Council's websites from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without first seeking permission is likely to breach copyright. Councillors and Council employees should avoid publishing anything they are unsure about.

Offensive material

SPC will not tolerate inappropriate or offensive use of its social media. It is impossible to write a list of everything that could be seen as inappropriate or offensive. It is likely to include things that could be reasonably considered threatening, discriminatory, harassment of an individual or group, or something that brings the Council into disrepute.