

Smalley Parish Council

External Communications Policy

Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the many types of media available.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech but to provide guidance on how to deal with issues that may arise when dealing with the media.

Basic Principles

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. All mediums for communication 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.

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.

Relevant 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 governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be referred to.

Contact with the media

The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council when they are in discussion with the media.

It should be noted that Confidential documents such as exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be communicated by any means to the media. If this situation does arise, an investigation will be undertaken to establish who is responsible and appropriate action will be taken.

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 Council's solicitor before any response is made.

There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Members contact details are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences. In all these and similar issues, advice must be sought from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.

All formal requests for comment regarding SPC policy on any matter should be directed to the Clerk in the first instance. If unavailable, the Chairperson should be contacted. When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or Chairman are authorised to make contact with the media. All responses to the press should be drafted by the Chairperson with the assistance of the Clerk to ensure accuracy regarding the council's current policy on the matter.

Responses drafted on any matter may also be directed to another councillor with the assistance of the Clerk and others for accuracy and whether it is in keeping with appropriate law relevant to the subject in hand. In this instance the Chairperson should be made fully aware of the response and agree to its contents.

Statements made by the Chairman and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion. If SPC does not have an official position on the matter raised, this should be stated

Other Councillors can communicate with the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council. Councillors are at liberty to communicate with the press in their own right however, they must always maintain that they speak as individuals and not on behalf of SPC in line with SO 28 and adherence to the Code of Conduct.

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. Letters of this type should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not become drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.

Attendance at Council Meetings

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

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

On 6 August 2014, the 1960 Act was amended by the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 ("the 2014 Regulations"). The amended 1960 Act provides that a person may not orally report or comment about a meeting as it takes place if he is present at the meeting of a parish council or its committees but otherwise may;

- a) film, photograph or make an audio recording of a meeting;
- b) use any other means for enabling persons not present to see or hear proceedings at a meeting as it takes place or later;
- c) report or comment on the proceedings in writing during or after a meeting or orally report or comment after the meeting.

Press Releases

The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. 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.

Digital forms of Communication

The above includes Internet E Mail, SMS (texting) and Video conferencing such as Skype

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with all E Mail communications received and passing on any information on to the relevant Member or external agency for action, copies of subsequent communications should be provided to the Clerk

SMS (texting) members of the Council may use SMS as a convenient method of communication however Council members are reminded that this policy applies to all messages

This policy also applies to Video conferencing such as Skype, medium of communication

Internal communication and access to information within the Council

The Council is continually examining methods to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

Councillors are expected to abide by the "use of social media" section (see above) in all their work on behalf of the Council.

As more and more information becomes available “at the press of a button” it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of all information that they have access to and follow the General Data Protection Regulations at all times.

Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council’s Code of Conduct and the General Data Protection Regulations and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures. (At the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Members should also be careful only to “copy” essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the Reply All option if at all possible.