



Newton Popleford and Harpford Parish Council Press and Media Policy

Introduction

Policy adopted by resolution of Council – September 2017

Newton Popleford and Harpford Parish Council (“the Council”) is committed to the provision of accurate information in respect of its functions, decisions and actions.

The Council may communicate with those whose work involves gathering material for editorial publication in print, broadcast and electronic form (“the media”).

Where information is not available via the Council’s publication scheme, the Council shall endeavour to assist the media with enquiries about the Council’s functions, decisions and actions.

The purpose of this policy is:

- to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with the media
- to ensure that the views and policies of the Council are presented accurately
- to clarify who is authorised to speak on behalf of the Council
- to provide guidance for Councillors and Staff on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with the Press and Media
- to ensure consistency in the Council’s dealings with the Press and Media
- to ensure that all elements of the Press and Media will be treated equally

Legal Framework

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 1998 and the Council’s Standing Orders. The Council must also have regard to the Government’s Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

Media Attendance at Meetings

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 also speak, make representations and ask questions.

Recording of, and reporting on, meetings is subject to legislation contained within The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, ¹ to which the Council willingly complies.

The press/media are entitled to copies of the agenda and necessary supporting papers for a meeting which can be obtained from the Council’s website before any convened meeting. Their representatives shall be given reasonable facilities for taking and communicating their report of a meeting, subject to the legislation referred to above. ¹

The Clerk

Wherever possible, all communications with the Press and Media should be made through the Clerk.

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 Chairman. In the absence of the Clerk, media communications will be handled by the Chairman. In the absence of the Chairman, the Vice Chairman and/or relevant Committee Chairman will be consulted.

Communications made by the Clerk will relate to the stated business and day to day management of the activities or adopted policy of the Council. They should not speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council. Where such questions are put to the Clerk, they should inform the enquirer that they will be notified of a response within 24 hours where practicable. The Clerk should then consult with the Chairman or relevant Councillor(s) to formulate a suitable response, which may in fact, be that the Council does not wish to make a comment at that time or wishes to defer comment until a more thorough investigation / review of the matter under consideration has been undertaken.

The Clerk, with prior consultation with the Chairman [or Vice Chairman/Committee Chairman], is authorised to publish press statements on any urgent matters where there is insufficient time for a Council meeting but any such statements must be referred to at the next convened meeting of council for consideration and ratification by members of Council.

Councillors

Councillors should be aware that, according to case law, the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. Councillors must therefore be careful about expressing individual views to the press or media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business.

Whilst it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that they voted against a decision or motion if this took place in an open session, Councillors should not seek to undermine a collective corporate decision through the medium of the Press or other media (including Social Media).

Press releases / approaches made to the Press / Media by the Council

Press releases may be issued proactively to alert the media to a potential story, provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue.

Press releases made on behalf of the Council will normally be prepared by the Clerk following any meetings of the Council or Committees in consultation with the Chairman [Vice Chairman] of Council or relevant Committee. If press releases are drafted by any other officer or Councillor, they must be authorised and issued by the Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman [Vice Chairman] of Council or relevant Committee. In the absence of the Clerk, this authority passes to the Chairman/Vice-Chairman.

A direct approach by the Council to the media seeking an interview, issuing a statement or press release or to publish an article may only be made with authorisation from the Council or relevant committee, except in the case of an urgent matter, with insufficient time for a Council meeting, when the Clerk is authorised to publish statements in consultation with the Chairman [Vice Chairman/Committee Chairman].

Approaches from the Press / Media

Unexpected approaches from representatives of the media can lead to unguarded or inaccurate or unsubstantiated comments being made and great care must therefore be taken to avoid misrepresentation of the Council's policy or its position on the matter in question.

Reporters should be directed to contact the Clerk (or, in their absence, the Chairman) if they want to carry out an interview or obtain a statement about the Council's business and actions.

Except in the most straightforward cases, the caller should be informed that a statement will be made within 24 hours and they should be asked to set out clearly what they want to know. This will allow time for the Clerk to consult with the Chairman in producing a carefully worded response within a reasonable time.

Any verbal or written statement given by the Clerk must represent the corporate position of the Council, not the individual views of councillors or staff held in their official capacity.

Where the matter concerned has not been discussed by the Council, an immediate response cannot be made and this should be made clear to the enquirer. The Clerk should then consult the Chairman [Vice Chairman/Committee Chairman] on an appropriate response, which may ultimately be “no comment”. It should be noted, however, that such a comment can often lead to further press/public speculation and negative reputational damage and, in the spirit of openness and transparency, it must only be considered as a last resort.

General Principles to be observed by Councillors and Staff

- Be calm; Be informed and certain of all your facts;
- Ensure that when making comments on behalf of the Council that you are aware what Council Policy is and that your comments reflect that policy;
- Ensure that your comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or staff, into disrepute and ensure that comments are neither libellous nor slanderous;
- Any publicity 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 facts, issues or arguments should not be oversimplified;
- Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards;
- Public funds must not be used to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy;
- Council resources must not be used on publicity that is, or could be misinterpreted as being, party political or on publicity which could be seen as promoting an individual member, particularly at election times (this is referred to as “purdah”);
- The Council, its Councillors and Staff cannot disclose information which is confidential or where disclosure of information is prohibited by law;
- Councillors must act with integrity and observe the Members’ Code of Conduct at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the Council;
- Councillors and staff must not communicate their personal views about the Council’s business, decisions and actions;
- Councillors and Staff are not permitted to misrepresent the corporate position and views of the Council or damage the reputation of others in the Council, or the Council itself;
- If expressing personal views in their private capacity, Councillors are not permitted to use their title “Councillor” or “Cllr.” and employees are not permitted to use their job title. This would imply that they are making a statement purporting to be Council policy;
- A copy of any written material sent to the Press and/or Media by a Councillor, as representing the Council, must be forwarded to the Clerk;
- A Councillor or Officer must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the Press on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on the Council’s or Committee’s agenda or at any other private briefing. This would be a breach of the Member’s Code of Conduct and may result in a Standards Committee investigation;
- A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an officer at meetings held in public or before the Press;

This policy was adopted by resolution of Council on 25.SEP.2017 and shall be reviewed annually thereafter.

This policy will be published on the Council’s website: www.newtonpopplefordpc.co.uk
