

# WEEDON PARISH COUNCIL

## Press and Media Policy

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Weedon Parish Council (the “**Council**”) for working with the media and to deal with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.
- 1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to deal with issues which may arise when dealing with the media.

### 2. Key Aims

- 2.1 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 explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.
- 2.2 It is important that the press have access to the Parish Clerk (“**Clerk**”) and the Parish Councillors (“**Councillors**”) 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 is properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

### 3. The Legal Framework

- 3.1 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](#).
- 3.2 The Council’s adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

#### **4. Contact with the Media**

- 4.1 The Clerk and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- 4.2 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigations shall take place to establish who was responsible, and appropriate action must be taken.
- 4.3 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 legal experts before any response is made.
- 4.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include: the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Councillor contact details are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences which are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.
- 4.5 All formal requests for comment regarding Council policy should be directed to the Clerk in the first instance. If unavailable, the Chairman of the Council ("**Chairman**") should be contacted.
- 4.6 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 Chairman with the assistance of the Clerk for accuracy regarding the Council's current policy on the matter in question and to its lawfulness.
- 4.7 Responses drafted on any matter may however be directed to another Councillor with the assistance of the Clerk and to other professional advisers for accuracy and lawfulness. In this instance the Chairman should be made fully aware of the response agree to its contents.
- 4.8 Statements made by the Chairman and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion. If the Council does not have an official position on the matter raised, this should be stated as the Council's current position.
- 4.9 Other Councillors can communicate with the media but they 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 the Council, in line with the Council's Standing Orders and adherence to its Code of Conduct.

- 4.10 There are occasions where it is appropriate for the Council to submit a written letter or email, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors published or submitted by other correspondents. Such communications should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence should come from the Clerk.

## **5. Attendance of Media at Council Meetings**

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.
- 5.2 On 6<sup>th</sup> August 2014 the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 was amended by the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 to provide that a person may not orally report or comment about a meeting as it is taking place if that person is present at the meeting of a parish council or its committees. However, that person 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.

## **6. Press Releases**

- 6.1 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 Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 6.2 The Clerk or any Councillor may draft a press release, however it must be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure the principles outlined in section 3 above (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.

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