



Stoke Lodge and The Common Parish Council Press and Media Policy

Introduction

The purpose of this Policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within

Stoke Lodge and The Common Parish Council for working with the press and media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media. It is a guide to both Councillors and Officers of the Council in their relationships with the news media in such a way as to ensure the smooth running of the Council.

It is not the intention of this Policy to curb the freedom of speech 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 area.

This policy does not seek to be comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some issues that may arise when dealing with news media organisations including press officers attending meetings. It sets out the framework for Parish Council Members and employees to follow in contacting the media and informing the public about the Council's activities, the decisions it takes and the services it provides.

Key Aims

Stoke Lodge and The Common 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 service, identifying attitudes and measuring satisfaction.

The Council is accountable to the electorate for its actions and shall therefore be proactive in making all reasonable efforts to make its decisions and policies known.

The media – press, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community. Therefore 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.

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. The community in this

sense includes all residents, elected representatives, businesses, schools, shops, places of worship, statutory agencies, voluntary organisations, groups and associations.

Publicity should:

- Be lawful
- Be cost effective
- Be objective
- Be even-handed
- Be appropriate
- Have regard to equality and diversity
- Be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

The Legal Framework

i. 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.

ii. Local authorities should ensure that publicity complies with all applicable statutory provisions. Paid-for advertising must comply with the Advertising Standards Authority's Advertising Codes.

iii. Part 3 of the Communications Act 2003 prohibits political advertising on television or radio. Local authorities must ensure that their publicity does not breach these restrictions.

iv. Section 125 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 places a specific restriction on the publication by a local authority of material relating to a referendum under Part 7 of that Act, during the period of 28 days immediately before the referendum is held.

v. Regulation 5 of the Local Authorities (Conduct of Referendums) (England) Regulations 2007 (S.I. 2007/2089) prohibits local authorities from publishing material in the 28 days immediately before a referendum which expresses support for, or opposition to a particular answer to a referendum question relating to the constitutional arrangements of the authority.

vi. Regulation 15 of the Local Authorities (Referendums, Petitions and Directions) (England) Regulations 2000 (S.I. 2000/2852) prohibits local authorities from incurring expenditure to publish material which appears designed to influence people in deciding whether or not to sign a petition relating to the constitutional arrangements of the authority, or to assist others to publish such material.

vii. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy:

- Local authorities should ensure that publicity relating to policies and proposals from central government is balanced and factually accurate. Such publicity may set out the local authority's views and reasons for holding those views, but should avoid anything likely to be perceived by readers as constituting a political statement, or being a commentary on contentious areas of public policy.
- Any publicity describing the council's policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on the facts or explanation or both.

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. It is acceptable for local authority publicity to correct erroneous material which has been published by other parties, despite the fact that the material being corrected may have been published with the intention of influencing the public's opinions about the policies of the authority. Such publicity should seek to explain the facts in an objective manner.

- Where paid-for advertising is used by local authorities, it should be clearly identified as being advertising. Paid-for advertising, including advertisements for the recruitment of staff, should not be used in any publication owned or controlled by a political party.
- Advertisements for the recruitment of staff should reflect the tradition of political impartiality of local authority employees and should not (except in the case of advertisements relating to the appointment of staff pursuant to section 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 (assistants for political groups)) refer to any political activities or affiliations of candidates.
- "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."

viii. In particular, Officers and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

ix. 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 appropriate action in accordance with the Standing Orders and Code of Conduct adopted by the Council will be taken.

x. 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.

xi. 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 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 or other appropriate advisory body before any response is made to the media.

Contact with the Media

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

- ii. Press releases and statements will be prepared by the Clerk in association with other Members as required, and will normally be restricted to matters that have been debated and agreed by the Parish Council.
- iii. Other Members of the Parish Council and employees who identify a media opportunity should refer to the Press Office so as to ensure accuracy and consistency in any subsequent press release or contact with the media.
- iv. If a Member or employee receives an approach or enquiry from the media about any matter relating to the Parish Council, it should be referred to the Press Office. A decision will then be made by the Clerk in consultation with other Members, about the format and content of any response.
- v. Nothing in these guidelines is to be interpreted as preventing, or attempting to prevent, Members from expressing a personal opinion through the media; for example by writing to a newspaper or posting an item on an internet site. Members must make it clear that any views expressed are their own personal views and not the view of the Parish Council. Members should take care not to misrepresent and/or bring the Council into disrepute and must bear in mind their responsibilities in the Code of Conduct.
- vi. Employees (other than the Clerk) should not contact the media on any matter relating to the Council unless specifically authorised by the Clerk and/or Chairman of the Council.
- vii. All press releases and other materials are to be kept for reference.
- viii. Caution should be exercised 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.
- ix. Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Clerk following agreement 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 with the Clerk first. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.
- x. 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

- i. Agendas and minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets upon request and the dates of meetings will be available on the Council's website
- ii. The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, prior to the meeting.
- iii. The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace made available.

Press Releases

- i. 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.
- ii. Any Officer or Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee 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 is monitored.

Notices

- i. The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Clerk.
- ii. The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of agendas and other Council information.

Cost Effectiveness

- i. In relation to all publicity, the Council should be able to confirm that consideration has been given to the value for money that is being achieved, including taking into account any loss of potential revenue arising from the use of local authority-owned facilities to host authority publicity.
- ii. In some circumstances it will be difficult to quantify value for money, for example where the publicity promotes a local amenity which is free to use. In such a case the Council should be able to show that they have given thought to alternative means of promoting the amenity and satisfied themselves that the means of publicity chosen is the most appropriate.
- iii. If another public authority, such as central government, has issued publicity on a particular topic, the Council should incur expenditure on issuing publicity on the same matter only if they consider that additional value is achieved by the duplication of that publicity. Additional value might be achieved if locally produced publicity gives a local context to national issues.
- iv. The purchase of advertising space should not be used as a method of subsidising voluntary, public or commercial organisations.

Review

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