

## **SWAFFHAM PRIOR PARISH COUNCIL**

### **PRESS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY**

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the press and social media. This policy sits alongside relevant existing policies, which need to be taken into consideration.
- 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 when dealing with the media.

#### **2. Key Aims**

- 2.1 The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this is achieved through effective two-way communication. The media – press, radio, TV, internet – are important in conveying information to the community, so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with all aspects of the media to increase public awareness of services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.
- 2.2 It is important that the press have access to the Clerk and Councillors and to background information to assist them in giving accurate information to the public. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

#### **3. 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 should adhere to the adopted Standing Orders.
- 3.3 The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication.

#### **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 should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who is responsible and appropriate action will 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 the Council's solicitor before any response is made. Whenever possible, information given to the press should be in writing so as not to leave interpretation open to misunderstanding and/or misreporting.
- 4.4 Personal privacy issues must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information such as contact details (where not available in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.

- 4.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or the Chair (or in their absence, the Vice-Chair) are authorised to make contact with the media and to issue statements on behalf of the Council.
- 4.6 All 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. The Clerk is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council. Where such questions are put to the Clerk, they will be brought before the Council for consideration at the next meeting.
- 4.7 Statements made by the Clerk and/or Chair (or Vice-Chair) should reflect the Council's opinion.
- 4.8 There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter to the media, e.g. to explain important policies or to correct factual errors. Such letters should be brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over time. All correspondence of this type should come from the Clerk.
- 4.9 We will provide to the Swaffham Prior Crier each month, in a timely manner, Notes from the Parish Council Meeting subject to their publication being accompanied by the following caveat placed in a prominent position relative to the Notes:  
“Produced from unapproved minutes and may contain errors; approved minutes can be found at <http://www.swaffham-prior.co.uk/pc/minutes.html>”

## **5. Attendance of media to Council meetings**

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.
- 5.2 The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.
- 5.3 Any filming or taping of Council proceedings by the media should be with prior notice to the Clerk (see Standing Orders 1.1).

## **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 press releases must be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section 3 are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

## **7. Councillors interacting with the media.**

- 7.1 A Councillor is free to express their personal opinion through the media as long as they make it clear that any views expressed are their personal views, not the views of the Council. Councillors should not use the prefix 'Cllr' when expressing personal views.
- 7.2 Councillors should bear in mind their responsibilities under the Council's Code of Conduct and not misrepresent the Council or bring it into disrepute.
- 7.3 Councillors have an obligation to respect Council policy once made and should not seek to undermine a Council decision through the media.
- 7.4 Councillors should not raise matters or make comment on subjects relating to the conduct or capability of a Council employee at meetings held in public or to the media.

Any enquiry from the media to a councillor should be referred to the Clerk and/or Chair (or Vice-Chair).

## **8. Social Media.**

8.1 Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites, including (but not limited to):

- The Parish Council website
- Facebook and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro-blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Blogs and discussion forums
- Email

8.2 Individual councillors and Council staff are responsible for what they post in a council capacity and individually in a personal capacity. In the main, councillors and staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. When using social media (including email), councillors and staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

8.3 Social media may be used to:

- Distribute agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Present good news stories linked to website or press pages
- Advertise vacancies
- Re-tweet or share information from partner agencies such as Principle Authorities, Police, libraries, Health and so on
- Announce new information
- Post or share information from other parish-related community groups such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities.
- Refer resident's queries to the clerk and all other councillors.

8.4 Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative. Councillors and staff must not:

- Hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- Present personal opinions as that of the Council
- Present themselves in a way that may cause embarrassment to the Council
- Post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Council
- Post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- Engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- Use an individual's name without written permission to do so
- Publish photographs or videos of minors with parental permission
- Post any information that infringes the copyright of others
- Post any information that may be deemed libel
- Post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- Bring the Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- Post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief

- Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence
  - Publish untrue statements
  - Publish personal data of individuals without permission
  - Publish obscene material.
- 8.5 Councillors views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the Council at any council or committee meeting may constitute pre-disposition, pre-determination or bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings.
- 8.6 Anyone with concerns regarding content places on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, council staff or residents should report them to the clerk.
- 8.7 The Council will appoint a nominated person as a moderator of parish council social media pages which are deemed to be in contravention of this and other policies and/or of a defamatory or libellous nature.

To be reviewed annually at the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council.