



HOOK PARISH COUNCIL

MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY

and

COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

1 Introduction

Hook Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media. The purpose of this policy is to define roles and responsibilities for managing communication between the council and the media. It will also assist the media by clarifying the mechanism for provision of information and responses to enquiries.

The intention of this policy is to adopt a framework for maintaining an effective working relationship with the media. This should be based on coherent, professional, accurate and reliable presentation of information.

2. Key aims of media relations

The council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media are important in conveying information to the community so the council must maintain positive, constructive media relations. The council should work with the media to increase public awareness of the services provided by the council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.

It is important that the media have access to appropriate officers and members and to background information to assist them to properly inform the public of all the relevant facts. The council may use a variety of channels of communication as necessary.

The key aims of this policy are to work with the media to -

- build up a relationship of trust and mutual understanding
- explain the council's policies and services to the local community
- communicate important public information messages
- encourage local democracy and enable people to participate in the work of the council
- enhance the reputation of the council

3. The legal framework

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.

Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy, in particular -

- "Any publicity describing the council's policies and aims 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 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."

Other guidelines are available, in particular the Institute of Public Relations Code of Conduct, which outlines the principles of good practice in the field of public relations.

The council has adopted the statutory Codes of Conduct for officers and members and all contacts with the media should be conducted on this basis. 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.

Confidential documents, reports and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the media without prior council approval. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will, if necessary, be undertaken as directed by the Council to establish responsibility and take appropriate action.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires that local authorities produce a publication scheme specifying the information that the authority publishes or intends to publish. The publication scheme will be of direct relevance to the media by providing a clear picture of what is available when they are seeking information on behalf of the public.

The council reserves the right to withhold certain sensitive information concerning commercial transactions, for example contracts or the purchase and sale of land and property. This applies to the council's own commercial interests and to the various parties involved in individual business transactions with the council. This area and other matters are guided by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Data Protection Act 1998 and exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

There are a number of personal privacy issues for officers and members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These 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 Council's Human Resources advisors before any response is made to the media.

4. Attendance of the media at committee meetings

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all committee agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, five working days prior to the meeting. In practice, Hook Parish Council provides the agenda for all full council meetings to the local press.

The media are encouraged to attend council meetings and seating will be made available. The relevant members and officers will be available following committee meetings for comment or interview.

Any filming or taping of Council or committee proceedings by the media are covered under the Standing orders Annex Protocol for reporting at meetings.

In common with all council's, certain agenda items are debated in a closed session of the meeting. The guidelines for which items will be heard in closed session are covered by the Local Government Act 1972 and the Council's Standing Orders. The council may be approached for comment on items discussed during closed session, however, they must continue to respect the confidentiality issues referred to in section 4 of this policy.

5. Guidance for members

- All media enquiries should be directed to the officer spokesperson(s) for the council. This is normally the Public and Media Relations portfolio holder, the Chairman or the Clerk.
- If appropriate, for a specific issue, The Chairman may authorise another councillor to make a statement on behalf of the Council.

- All media comment must accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of the council, made in an open meeting, can be quoted and made available to the media.
- The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and can speak with some authority, using plain English.
- Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of the council or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the council or other members.
- Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from the council's Solicitor before any response is made.
- Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement' to the media must clearly inform the media:
 - that their comment is made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of the Council;
 - that other councillors may hold a different view;
 - that the matter may still to be discussed or resolved by the council.

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for members and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that council resources should not be used on publicising individual members unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the council.

These extracts from the code illustrate the main points –

- “Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the council (for example, member of the Executive or Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and.....personalisation of issues or personal image making should be avoided.”
- “Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor which are relevant to her/his position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward her/his justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals.”
- “The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.”

Hook Parish Council has adopted the statutory Code of Conduct for members, the objective of which is to enhance and maintain standards of personal conduct and the integrity of the council.

6. Responding to approaches from the media

The Public and Media Relations Portfolio Holder or the Clerk can be contacted for preliminary discussions on any story or if a journalist or researcher is unsure who to approach for a comment.

Approaches from all press, radio or TV stations should be directed to the Clerk or the Public and Media Relations Portfolio Holder, who will discuss the nature of the story and if appropriate, direct the enquiry to the Clerk or other councillor, asking them to respond.

All proposals for feature articles or broadcast interviews or debates should be made through the Public and Media Relations Portfolio Holder or the Clerk.

The important considerations are that the person has the necessary understanding and facts, they are available when required and that they can speak with some authority, using plain English.

7. Proactive publicity

The council also has a duty to inform the public how their council tax is spent. To comply with this, Hook Parish Council distributes an annual report to every household in Hook and published its annual accounts as set out in the council's publication scheme.

The local media routinely receive copies of agendas for full council meetings, but may not be aware of the full extent of the work of the council. Press releases are one important method of passing information on to the media about individual projects and initiatives, the receipt of grants, appointment of new staff, VIP visits, human interest stories etc.

It is important that the Public and Media Relations Portfolio Holder is fully briefed on any issues that are likely to be complex or contentious or to be sustained for any length of time, preferably before the issue becomes public knowledge. In such a situation the Public and Media Relations Portfolio Holder will work with the relevant members and officers to produce a communications plan which will ensure that balanced, timely information is provided to keep all parties informed.

8. Press releases

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.

Press releases must all be issued via the Public and Media Relations Portfolio Holder or the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section 4 are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the council and that the use of the release can be monitored.

There are no guarantees that a news release will be used by the media but the presentation of a newsworthy story and the adoption of the appropriate style will increase the chances. One important aspect of news releases is the use of quotations from officers or members. As with responding to media enquires, it is not possible to draw up any hard and fast rules about who should be quoted.

The protocol for issuing news releases is –

- Identify potential news story
- If necessary have preliminary discussion with relevant officer or member
- Draft the text using the in-house style
- The Clerk or Public and Media Relations Portfolio Holder will distribute the news release, copy to relevant Members and officers and post on the website

- The Clerk will monitor use of the news release

9. Tone of Voice

In some ways the tone of voice of the written document is even more important than the tone of voice of something that is spoken because once something is written down and published correction is a longer process. It follows that even greater care is needed in written documentation than when speaking

Bearing in mind the position of the Parish Council within our community, our responsibilities to our Electors and to the even wider community outside our written communications are:

- Authoritative without being authoritarian
- Communicative without being irresponsible
- Approachable without being “matey”
- Accurate in terms of grammar spelling and phraseology without being old fashioned
- Concise without being economical with the truth
- Considered without withholding essential information
- Friendly without being casual

10. Media Evaluation

It is important to monitor how the council is represented by the media as this is how the local community will view the council. It is also important to have facts available to measure whether publicity targets are being achieved and to counter common misconceptions about media coverage.

Targets will be set for media coverage as part of the Communications Strategy which links into the Strategic Plan and Business Plans. Regular reports on media coverage will be produced and distributed to members and managers and posted on the website.

11. Advice and training

The Clerk will maintain a current list of media contacts.

All members and officers who are expected to deal with the media must be trained to the appropriate level and the Clerk will arrange suitable training courses.

All new members and officers should be made aware of this policy and how it affects them through induction and update programmes

12. Responsibilities and monitoring

It is the responsibility of all members and officers to ensure that effective media relations are maintained in order to achieve the aims set out in section 2.

13. Date of review

This policy will be reviewed annually.

PROTOCOL FOR REPORTING AT MEETINGS

(As referenced by Standing Order No: 3 (l and m))

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Protocol provides guidance to members of the public or press who wish to photograph or record proceedings at any of Hook Parish Council's public meetings.
- 1.2 The Council supports the principles of openness and transparency in the way it conducts its meetings. Sound recording, photographing, filming, and use of social media at meetings which are held in public is permitted:
 - (a) subject to the provisions of this Protocol; and
 - (b) provided that the Chairman is satisfied that it will not be disruptive or distracting to the good order and conduct of the meeting.
- 1.3 No restrictions will be placed on anyone using social media at a public meeting subject to the limitations regarding photography and audio/visual recording set out in this Protocol.
- 1.4 Meetings which take the form of hearings or which discuss sensitive employment or contractual information such as the Staff Committee, may not be suitable for recording due to the nature of some of the evidence given at the meeting. It will be at the Chairman's discretion to determine whether the recording of a particular meeting will be permitted.
- 1.5 Failure to follow the provisions within this Protocol may result in the Chairman refusing to allow the proceedings to be photographed or recorded.
- 1.6 For the purposes of this Protocol 'recording' includes sound recording, photographing, filming, and use of social media. Social media includes, but is not limited to Twitter, Facebook and blogs.

2. Before the meeting

- 2.1 Those wishing to record proceedings at a meeting are recommended to contact the Clerk as early as possible before the start of the meeting so that arrangements can be discussed and the agreement of the Chairman be sought.
- 2.2 The name, organisation (if applicable) and contact details of the person wishing to record proceedings are required and should be provided before the meeting if possible:

3. At the meeting

- 3.1 Notices will be displayed in the meeting room advising that proceedings may be recorded and the Chairman will make an announcement to this effect at the beginning of the meeting if a request has been received.

- 3.2 Members of the public attending a meeting to ask a question will be deemed to have given consent to being photographed or recorded.
- 3.3 Members of the public seated in the public seating area who actively object, should not be photographed, filmed or recorded as long as this does not undermine the broader transparency of the meeting.
- 3.4 Photography or filming must take place from a fixed position in the meeting room approved by the Chairman, to ensure that the view of Councillors, officers, public and press, is not obstructed.
- 3.5 The use of flash photography or additional lighting will only be permitted if agreed in advance with the Clerk and the Chairman.
- 3.6 Photography or audio/visual recording will be stopped if the Chairman feels it is disrupting or inhibiting the meeting in any way.
- 3.7 If someone refuses to stop recording when requested to do so the Chairman will ask the person to leave the meeting. If the person refuses to leave, the Chairman will adjourn the meeting or make other appropriate arrangements for the meeting to continue without disruption.
- 3.8 Anyone asked to leave a meeting because they have refused to comply with the Chairman's request to do so, may be refused permission to record future meetings.

4. After the meeting

- 4.1 Photographs and audio/visual recordings must not be edited in a way that could lead to misinterpretation of the proceedings. This includes refraining from editing the views being expressed in a way that may ridicule or show lack of respect towards those being photographed or recorded.
- 4.2 If someone fails to comply with this Protocol the Chairman may refuse to allow this person to record any future meetings.
- 4.3 The responsibility for how any photographs or audio/visual recording is used rests with the person who made the recording and not the Council.

HOOK PARISH COUNCIL

IMPORTANT NOTICE

PROTOCOL FOR REPORTING AT MEETINGS

1. The Council supports the principles of openness and transparency in the way it conducts its meetings.

Sound recording, photographing, filming, and use of social media at meetings which are held in public is permitted:

(a) subject to the provisions of the Protocol for Reporting at Meetings;

(b) provided that the Chairman is satisfied that it will not be disruptive or distracting to the good order and conduct of the meeting.

2. Where recording has been confirmed by the Chairman an announcement will be made at the start of the meeting to advise all participants of the presence and location of any recording devices.

3. If you enter the room after the meeting has started please ensure that any recording does not disrupt the meeting. If there is such disruption, the Chairman may adjourn the meeting or make other appropriate arrangements for the meeting to continue without disruption.

4. Only the official signed minutes of the council and its committees will be recognised as the formal, statutory and legally binding record of a meeting.



Anne Atkins, Parish Clerk

July 2015