Hopesay Parish Council
Press and Media Policy

Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to guide both Councillors and Officers of the Council in their relations with the Press and Media, in such a way as to ensure the smooth running of the Council.

This policy does not seek to be either prescriptive or comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with the Press and Media.

Above everything else, Councillors must observe the Council's Code of Conduct whenever they conduct the business of the authority / conduct the business of the office to which they have been elected/appointed; or act as a representative of the authority.

Clerk / Officer of the Council

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 the absence of the Clerk, media communications will be handled by the Chair.

In the absence of both the Chair and the Clerk, enquirers can be referred to the Vice Chair who will act as the spokesperson for the purposes of this element of the policy.

It follows therefore, that Press Statements etc should ideally be previously agreed by Council, or in line with adopted policy, or at the very least should follow minuted resolutions as closely as possible.

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 the enquirer can only be referred to the published Minutes or to a future Council meeting at which the matter is to be discussed, as considered appropriate. Should the Media wish to discuss an issue that is, or likely to be, subject to legal proceedings, then legal advice should be sought before any response is made.

Councillors

A Councillor must not disclose information of a confidential nature. This includes but is not limited to any matter which has been discussed under confidential items at a Council or Committee or Sub Committee meeting, or at any other private briefing. Generally speaking, councillors should refer all approaches by the Press and Media to the Clerk.

A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when formally representing or acting on behalf of the Council once they have been authorised by Council to do so. Should the Media wish to discuss an issue that is, or likely to be, subject to legal proceedings, then legal advice through Council should be sought before any response is made.

When speaking or providing written material to the Press and Media, Councillors should make clear the capacity, in which they are providing the information. For example: - as Chair, as an individual (i.e. letter to press for publication).

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Councillors, continued

Never use the prefix “Councillor”, or refer to your position on the Council, when writing to the press as an individual; as this implies you are stating Council policy. A copy of any written material sent to the Press and Media by a Councillor, as representing the Council following Council authorisation, must be forwarded to the Clerk to be kept on record.

To be safe, ensure Council has agreed its position on the matter before you speak. If in doubt say less rather than more.

Take particular care if the press or media approach you for comment on a controversial subject, and do not be led into stating something you did not really mean to say. If unsure about any particular policy, simply state “no comment” and ask the press to contact the Council Office.

Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful about expressing individual views to the press or media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business. Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not those of the Council. Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made, and whilst it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in an open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the press.

A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer at meetings held in public or before the press.

Dealing with the Press

When dealing with the Press verbally, members and officers should be aware of the following:

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.

Be and remain calm

Ensure that your comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or its staff into disrepute and ensure that comments are neither libellous nor slanderous

Social Media

In their use of social media (Facebook, Twitter email, etc) Councillors and Officers must at all times observe the principles stated in this policy.

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