

PRESS & MEDIA POLICY

...It is crucial to try and build a positive relationship with journalists to achieve more informed, positive reporting about your council.... Research by Communities and Local Government in 2006 revealed that, in general, people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local press.

NALC Communications Toolkit 2010

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 CMK Town Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena. The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities for managing communication between the Town Council and the media. It will also assist the media by clarifying the mechanism for provision of information and responses to enquiries.
- 1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with the media. This should be based on coherent, professional, accurate and reliable presentation of information.

2 KEY AIMS

- 2.1 The Town Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media – press, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Town Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the work of the Town Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies, priorities and representations.
- 2.2 The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the Town Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to Officers and Members and to background information to assist them in this role. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

- 2.3 The key aims of this policy are to work with the media to:
- build up a relationship of trust and mutual understanding;
 - explain the work of the Town Council to the local community;
 - communicate important public information messages;
 - encourage local democracy and enable people to participate in the work of the Town Council;
 - enhance the reputation of the Town Council.

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 (2011). Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy:-

- "Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims [and the provision of services] 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."

3.2 The Town Council has adopted the statutory Code 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.

3.3 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the media without prior approval of the Town Council. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and take appropriate action in accordance with the Standing Orders and Code of Conduct adopted by the Town Council.

3.4 The Town 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 Town Council's own commercial interests and to the various parties involved in individual business transactions with the Town 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.

- 3.5 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 Town Clerk before any response is made to the media.

4 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT TOWN COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- 4.1 Agendas and minutes of meetings will be on the Council's website.
- 4.2 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, prior to the meeting.
- 4.3 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available. The relevant members and officers will be available following meetings for comment or interview.
- 4.4 Any filming or taping of Town Council or Committee proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Town Clerk and Chair of the particular meeting.
- 4.5 In common with all councils, certain agenda items may be 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 Town Council's Standing Orders.

5 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

- 5.1 All media enquiries should be directed as speedily as practicable to the Chair of the Council or the Clerk.
- 5.2 When responding to approaches from the media, the Chair of the Council shall be the authorised contact with the media in consultation with the Clerk. However, if the subject of an enquiry relates to the work of one of the Town Council's Committees, the Chair of the Council may delegate the authorised contact role to the Chair of that Committee.
- 5.3 All media comment must accurately reflect the Town Council's opinion or position on the topic as adopted in documents, e.g. Minutes and policies.
- 5.4 All decisions of the Town Council, made in open meeting, can be quoted and made available to the media.
- 5.5 Where an enquiry relates to a matter where no Town Council policy or position has yet been made, the matter should be considered by the full Town Council at the next scheduled meeting or, if of sufficient import, at an extraordinary meeting, before a formal reply is given.

- 5.6 When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings, then legal advice should be taken before any response is made.
- 5.7 Whenever possible any information given to the press shall be given in writing so as not to leave interpretation open to misunderstanding and misreporting.
- 5.8 At no time shall the personal views of either members or officers of the Town Council be given to the press in a way which could be interpreted as a view of the Town Council as a whole.
- 5.9 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure it is clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Town Council. Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of the Town Council or negatively impact on teamwork or the credibility of the Town Council or other members.
- 5.10 Councillors must accept their legal collective responsibility for all decisions taken by the Town Council whether or not they personally supported those decisions. Councillors will not criticise or complain about such decisions if approached by the media to do so. No matter relating to the conduct or capability of a Councillor at a Meeting can be disclosed.
- 5.11 However nothing is contained in these guidelines that seeks to prevent any individual from expressing a personal opinion for example by writing to a newspaper or posting an item on the internet. Where personal views expressed differ from Town Council policy it must be made clear that the views expressed are not being made in your role as a councillor. Care must be taken not to misrepresent and or bring the Town Council into disrepute or undermine any decision made and must take account of the role and responsibilities under the Local Government Code of Conduct.

6 PUBLICITY

- 6.1 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 Town Council resources should not be used on publicising individual members unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the Town 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, Chair of a 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 their position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward their 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.”

6.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the Town Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the Town Council. In this situation, members holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

7 PRESS RELEASES

7.1 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 all officers and members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

7.2 Any officer or member may draft a press release or written statement. They must all be issued via the Chair or the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Town Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

7.3 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. Although it is not possible to draw up any hard and fast rules about who should be quoted, in most instances it will be the Chair of the Council or the Chair of the relevant Committee.

8 Letters to the Editor

- 8.1 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Town 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.
- 8.2 Letters representing the views of the Town Council should only be issued by the Clerk following agreement by the Town Council or relevant Committee. If individual Councillors choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Town Council or of an individual member.