UFFCULME PARISH COUNCIL – PRESS AND MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Introduction

1. Uffculme Parish Council ("the Council") is committed to the provision of accurate information about its governance, decisions and activities. Where this information is not available via the Council's publication scheme, please contact the Council's Clerk or, in their absence, the Chairman.
2. The Council shall, where possible, co-operate with those whose work involves gathering material for publication in any form including use of the internet ("the media")
3. This policy explains how the Council may work with the media to meet the above objectives in accordance with the legal requirements and restrictions that apply.
4. The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Members involved in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest. It is further to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be:
    - open and honest
    - proactive
    - responsive and timely
    - in line with the Council's Equal Opportunities policy

Legal Requirements and Restrictions

5. This policy is subject to the Council's obligations which are set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Action1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 1998, other legislation which may apply and the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations. The Council's Financial Regulations and relevant Standing Orders referenced in this policy are available via the Council's publication scheme.
6. The Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Council's Standing Orders, under contact or by common law. Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the Code of Conduct adopted by the Council, a copy of which is available via the Council's publication scheme.
7. Failure to follow the Parish Council's Policy on Press and Media Communications could lead to a breach of the statutory Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Council's reputation and efficiency. It is important that all Members and Officers who might come into contact with the media understand the implications of this Code which this policy explains within a local context.

Handling Media Enquiries

8. The Clerk in consultation with the Chairman will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the Parish Council. Members of the Council who are directly approached by the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this policy.

9. The Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. The phrase “no comment” should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

10. It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Clerk in conjunction with the Chairman to make the decision as to whether or not a news release should be issued.

Meetings

11. A meeting of the Council and its committees is open to the public unless the meeting resolves to exclude them because their presence at the meeting is prejudicial to the public interest due to the confidential nature of the business or other special reason(s) stated in the resolution. In accordance with the Council’s Standing Orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting of the Council and its committees, if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.
12. Where a meeting of the Council and its committees include an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Council’s Standing Orders.
13. The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a meeting of the Council and its committees (which includes e.g. using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV/radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums, or social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) which enable a person not at a meeting to see, hear or be given commentary about the meeting is permitted unless (i) the meeting has resolved to hold all or part of the meeting without the public present or (ii) such activities disrupt the proceedings or (iii) paragraphs 14 and 15 below apply.
14. The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a child or vulnerable adult at a Council or committee meeting is not permitted unless an adult responsible for them has given permission.
15. Oral reporting or commentary about a Council or committee meeting by a person who is present at the meeting is not permitted.
16. The Council shall, as far as is practicable, provide reasonable facilities for anyone taking a report of a Council or committee meeting and for telephoning their report at their own expense.
17. The Council’s Standing Orders will confirm if attendance by the public, their participation, photographing, recording, filming or other reporting is permitted at a meeting of a sub-committee

Publicity during Elections

18. The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (purdah) all proactive publicity about candidates and other politicians is halted. This applies to scheduled local, national or European elections. During this period Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required the relevant Officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this policy.

Press Releases

19. The use of news releases is a key technique for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements. There are two types of news release:
    - Council News Releases

    An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written and issued by the Clerk, having consulted with the the Chairman. Official Council releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Councillor. Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a Member's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.
    - Councillor News Releases

    Councillor news releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. This type of release may or may not be political and should not include the name of any Officer, use the Council logo or the Council telephone number as a point of contact. It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases to be provided to the Clerk or Chairman. Councillors seeking advice can contact the Clerk.

    NOTE: Members should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the right to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful when expressing individual views to the news media. Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made, while it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make it clear that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the news media.

Other Communications with the Media

20. This policy does not seek to regulate councillors in their private capacity. Officers and Members of the Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-Council related organisations must not refer to their Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.
21. The Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and view of the Council. If the views of the Councillors are different to the Council's corporate position and views, they will make this clear.
22. The Council's Clerk, or in their absence, the Chairman may contact the media if the Council wants to provide information, a statement or other material about the Council.
23. Subject to the obligations on Councillors not to disclose information referred to in paragraph 5 above and not to misrepresent the Council's position, Councillors are free to communicate their position and views.
24. Any member of staff or member of the Council contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the matter to the Parish Clerk in conjunction with the Chairman. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist. Officers and Members should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages, their role being to provide expertise and factual knowledge only in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.