



# WALTHAM ABBEY TOWN COUNCIL

## Media Policy

Date Adopted	Minute Reference	Review Date
06/02/2019	669/19	February 2020
19 <sup>th</sup> October 2022	212/22	October 2023

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.
- 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. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

## **2 KEYS AIMS**

- 2.1 The 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 Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.
- 2.2 The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the 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.

## **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 governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy: -

- “Local authorities should ensure that publicity relating to policies and proposals from central government is balanced and factually accurate. Such publicity may set out the local authority’s views and reasons for holding those views but should avoid anything likely to be perceived by readers as constituting a political statement or being a commentary on contentious areas of public policy.” S15
- “Any publicity describing the council’s policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on the facts or explanation or both.” S16
- 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.” S16
- 3.2 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 leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and take appropriate action.
  - 3.4 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.
  - 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.

#### **4.0 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA**

- 4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Leader and the Chair of Committees should be the authorised contact with the media in consultation with the Town Clerk. The Town Clerk is, however, given permission to speak to the media in their absence.
- 4.2 Statements made by the Leader, or the Chair of Committees should reflect the Council’s opinion.
- 4.3 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council.
- 4.6 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

#### **5 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports, and minutes are sent to the media on request, three working days prior to the meeting<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Local Government Act 1972 S100 (6(a))

5.2 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

5.3 Any filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Town Clerk and Leader of the particular meeting.

## **6 ELECTIONS**

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 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: -

- “Local authorities should pay particular regard to the legislation governing publicity during the period of heightened sensitivity before elections and referendums. It may be necessary to suspend the hosting of material produced by third parties, or to close public forums during this period to avoid breaching any legal restrictions”. S33
- “During the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, local authorities should not publish any publicity on controversial issues or report views or proposals in such a way that identifies them with any individual members or groups of members. Publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published by local authorities during this period unless expressly authorised by or under statute. It is permissible for local authorities to publish factual information which identifies the names, wards, and parties of candidates at elections”. S34
- “In general, local authorities should not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters. However, this general principle is subject to any statutory provision which authorises expenditure being incurred on the publication of material designed to influence the public as to whether to support or oppose a question put at a referendum. It is acceptable to publish material relating to the subject matter of a referendum, for example to correct any factual inaccuracies which have appeared in publicity produced by third parties, so long as this is even-handed and objective and does not support or oppose any of the options which are the subject of the vote”. S35

6.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the 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 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 All press releases shall be issued by the Town 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 Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.