



# **COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA POLICY**

**2020**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within East Cowes Council (known as “the Council”) for working with the press and media (known as “the media”) and how it 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 enforce strict rules and regulations. 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 Councillors 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 Government’s Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. 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 Officers and Councillors 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 appropriate action will be taken in accordance with Standing Orders and the Code of Conduct adopted by the Council.
- 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 several personal privacy issues for Officers and Councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively in accordance with the Council's policies on Freedom of Information and Data Protection. These issues include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Councillor 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 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA**

- 4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Mayor of the Council should be the authorised contact with the media in consultation with the Town Clerk. However, if the subject of an enquiry relates to the work of one of the Council's Committees, the Mayor may delegate the authorised contact role to the Chairman of that Committee.
- 4.2 Statements made to the media must reflect the Council's opinion.
- 4.3 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear to the media **that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council.**
- 4.4 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the 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.
- 4.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Town Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee.  
If individual Councillors choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, it is generally advisable not to use the prefix Councillor in any communication and they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Town Clerk. It should always be made **absolutely clear** to the media whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Councillor.
- 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 Agendas and agreed minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets together with dates of meetings being available on the Council's website.
- 5.2 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and agreed minutes are sent to the media, on request, prior to the meeting.
- 5.3 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating, agendas and workspace will be made available.
- 5.4 Filming, photographing, recording, broadcasting or transmitting the proceedings of any meeting of the Council, or a committee or subcommittee should be conducted in accordance with the Councils Recording, Photographing or Filming Policy and should not disrupt the normal proceedings of these meetings in any way.

## 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 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, Chairman 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 images 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 (purdah) 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 Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether 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, Councillors 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 Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 7.2 Any Officer or Councillor may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Town Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three of this policy (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.

## **8 NOTICES**

- 8.1 The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Town Clerk.
- 8.2 The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of agendas, minutes and other council information.

## **9 URGENT SITUATIONS**

- 9.1 In the case of an urgent letter or press release being required in advance of a Council or Committee meeting, this may be issued by the Town Clerk with the agreement of the Mayor of the Council or relevant Committee following circulation of a draft version to other Councillors for comment.
- 9.2 In the case of urgent actions being required in the absence of the Councillors and Officers with specific roles and responsibilities under this policy, the following delegations shall apply:
- a) the Deputy Mayor of the Council may act in the absence of the Mayor;
  - b) the Vice Chairman of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chairman of the Committee;
  - c) the Town Clerk may act in the absence of the Deputy Mayor of the Council or a Chairman of a Committee; and
  - d) the Assistant Clerk may act in the absence of the Town Clerk.