Nutfield Parish Council

Website: www.nutfieldpc.com

PRESS, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Introduction

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, as issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The code is statutory guidance and therefore councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

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.

Failure to follow the council's Media and Communications Policy could lead to a breach of the statutory code and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the council's reputation. It is important that all councillor and officers understand the implications of this code which this policy explains within a local context.

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, Media and communications in general.

Above everything else, a Councillor must observe Nutfield Parish Council's Code of Conduct whenever he/she conducts the business of the authority, conducts the business of the office to which he/she has been elected/appointed or acts as a representative of the authority.

Approach to publicity

The council welcomes enquiries from the press and media, and recognises that a good relationship with the press helps communicate effectively with residents.

Equally, the council recognises that taking a proactive approach to communication ensures information is made available to residents in a timely manner, and is accessible via as many media sources as possible including emerging social media platforms.

Principles of communication

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity identifies key principles regarding publicity, and the council will ensure any publicity:

- Is lawful
- Is cost effective
- Is objective
- Is even-handed
- Is appropriate
- Has regard to equality and diversity
- Is issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

Official council press releases

The council recognises that the use of press releases is a key technique for publicising council activities, decisions and achievements.

An official council press release is made on behalf of the council as a whole. In certain circumstances, it may be appropriate for a councillor (normally the Chairman, Deputy Chairman or committee Chairman) to draft the press release, but the Clerk (or other nominated officer) will be responsible for checking and subsequently issuing any official council press release.

All press 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 councillor's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

Press releases will be issued to local newspapers and copies will be made available on the council's website. An edited version may be available via the council's social media platforms, with a link to the full story available.

Requests for interview

Any request for an interview with a councillor or officer should be referred to the Clerk (or other nominated officer) in the first instance. The Clerk, in liaison with the Chairman, will determine the most appropriate councillor or officer to be put forward for interview.

Where a councillor is authorised to speak on behalf of the council, it is their responsibility to ensure they are clear on the corporate position of the council, and that their responses to questions accurately reflect this.

Where an officer is authorised to speak on behalf of the council, they must never give their opinion on specific council policy and must remember their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge in support of the council's agreed policies.

If a councillor has not been specifically authorised by the council to speak to the media on a particular issue, a councillor who is asked for a comment should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as such.

Publicity during elections

There are specific rules governing publicity 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 is halted.

During the purdah period, all council publicity shall be managed by the Clerk (or other nominated officer), and any quotes provided in support of press releases will be given by authorised officers.

Social media

The council recognises that for some residents, accessing information via social media platforms is their preferred method. While there are too many social media sites to include all of them, the council will endeavour to use those which are most widely used, and regularly review the type and number of social media sites used.

Social media sites (Nutfield Parish Council official sites only) will be used to support other communications issued by the council, and will help provide a consistent message across all media formats. To help achieve this, all social media releases will approved by the Clerk (or other nominated officer).

Where officers use social media in a professional capacity to represent the council, the council's corporate identity will be used and not that of any individual officer.

Officers using social media in this way must respect copyright, data protection, freedom of information and other laws, and be aware of the risks of action for defamation. Officers must not use insulting or offensive language, or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in the workplace or elsewhere.

Parish Clerk and Officers of the Council

The Parish 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 Parish Clerk, media communications will handled by the Assistant Clerk. In the absence of both of these officers enquirers will be referred to the Chairman who will act as the spokesperson for the purposes of this element of the policy. All communications made by the Parish Clerk will relate to the stated business and day to day management of the activities or adopted policy of the Council. He is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council. Where such questions are put to the Parish Clerk he should refer the enquirer to the Chairman or a
Committee Chairman as considered appropriate.

No other officer of the Council apart from the above, unless authorised by the Parish Clerk, is permitted to speak or communicate with the Press and Media on any matter affecting the Council or its business.

Members of the Council

- A Councillor must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on the Council's or Committees' agenda or at any other private briefing.
- A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Nutfield Parish Council
- When speaking or providing written material to the Press and Media, Members should make clear the capacity, in which they are providing the information. For example: -
  - as Chairman
  - as Chairman of a Committee
  - as an individual (i.e. letter to press for publication)
  - as spokesperson or as Press Officer for a the Parish Council

- Never use the prefix "Cllr" when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating Council policy. However, a copy of any written material sent to the Press and Media by a Member, as representing the Council, must be forwarded to the Parish Clerk.

- 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 Parish 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 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 Parish Council that you are aware what Council Policy is and that your comments reflect that policy.
- Be 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.

Issues of which to be aware

Councillors and officers not used to dealing with the press may be surprised when they see that statements made in all innocence look very different in print than they did when they were spoken. It is advantageous to write out a statement or position beforehand.

Meetings of Council and Committees

Copies of Agenda, Minutes and Reports sent to Members for meetings of the Council or its Committees can be e-mailed to the Press and Media and will be placed on the Council's website.

Facilities will be provided at meetings for the Press to take notes of the proceedings. As provided in the Council's Standing Orders both the Press and Public may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion. [Note: The Parish Council is governed by the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act, 1960.

Press Releases

- All press releases made on behalf of the Parish Council will be prepared by the Parish Clerk following any meetings of Committees, Sub-Committees, Working and Steering Groups.
- The Parish Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman, is also authorised to publish press releases on any urgent matters where there is insufficient time for a council meeting.

This document has been prepared as a guidance note for officers and elected members. It represents the policy of the Council in respect of its relationships with the Press and Media.

The policy has been prepared to ensure consistency in the Council's dealing with the Press and Media and details who is authorised to speak on behalf of the Council. It has been drafted to ensure that the views and policy of the Council are presented accurately.

In providing information to the Press and Media, Members and Officers representing the Council will abide by the "Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity" published by the DCLG.

The overriding principle of this policy is that all elements of the Press and Media will be treated equally.

General guidance for councillors and officers

Councillors and officers must ensure they do not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press or other media on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on council or committee agendas or at any other private briefing.

Councillors and officers should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the council.

Councillors should not use the prefix 'Councillor' when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating council policy, which is not necessarily consistent with your personal opinion.

8Any councillor failing to follow the guidelines set out in this policy may find themselves in breach of the Members' Code of Conduct and subject to a complaint to the Monitoring Officer.

Any officer failing to follow the guidance set out in this policy could face disciplinary action