



HALSTEAD TOWN COUNCIL

PRESS, MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

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 deal 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, it provides guidance on how to deal with issues that may arise when dealing with the media.

2 KEY 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 It is important that the press have access to the Clerk/ Members and to background information to assist them in giving accurate information to the public. 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.

3.2 The Town Council's Standing Orders should be adhered to.

4.0 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

4.2 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.

4.3 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.

4.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal

information, such as home address and telephone number; disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.

4.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk, Chairman or the Chairman of Committees are authorised to make contact with the media.

4.6 Statements made by the Chairman or the Chairman or Vice chairman of Committees and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion.

4.7 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.

4.8 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. Such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.

5 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.

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

6 PRESS RELEASES

6.1 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 the Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

6.2.0 The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be shown to 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 Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

7. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

7.1 The Town Council will maintain a formal Facebook account to promote the services and functions of the Town Council to encourage greater public awareness and involvement. The day-to-day administration and use of the facility shall be the responsibility of the Town Clerk and Council Officers to address the following key target areas:

- To promote Council events and public meetings;
- To inform the public of progress with works to public space and equipment owned and maintained by the Town Council;
- To be able to upload events put on by other groups/organisations to the Town Council Facebook Page;
- To be able to post events and items of interest

In addition, the facility will be used to provide other information specifically agreed by the Council or its Committees for release on the Council's Facebook page. Town Council staff / officers will not engage in commenting on Facebook posts. Facebook will be used as a notification method, not as a form of 2-way communication. The use of social media shall not replace other forms of communication, but should be complementary to it. The account will be updated and monitored as and when required and care will be exercised to avoid risks associated with conflict with current legislation including the Data Protection Act 1998, Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010. The facility will not be used to represent the political views of any individual member or group or members of the Council and will not enter into any correspondence.

7.2 Members' Own Accounts – Members of the Council may wish to have their own media accounts and comments. This includes Facebook, Twitter, Linked-in and other less commonly used social media platforms. Members must remember that they are legally responsible for the content of any messages and that the requirements and principles associated with the adopted Code of Conduct shall remain in force, if they are posting in their capacity as a Town Councillor. If posting as a private individual, they should make this clear, but should be aware that comments could be interpreted as the view of the Council, and should avoid being involved in arguments on Facebook, or other social media.

7.3 Both councillors and staff should be aware that opinions expressed on social media may not be based on fact and may be biased. Therefore information gathered from social media should not be relied on to represent fact, and should not be used to support opinions expressed in Council matters.

7.4 Both councillors and staff should also be aware that if they express an opinion on social media, this could be seen as representing the views of the Council, even if expressed on a personal account, purely because of that person's link to the Council. In addition, it is possible for comments made on social media to be harmful to the work or reputation of the Council. If this were found to be the case, the Council might be forced to take disciplinary action.