

Loxwood Parish Council

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

1. Introduction and Definitions

1.1 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 Members and Officers of Loxwood Parish Council (the Council) must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

1.2 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 Members and Officers understand the implications of this code which this policy explains within a local context.

1.3 This policy should be read in conjunction with the Members' Code of Conduct.

1.4 For the purposes of this policy, "Meeting" means any meeting of:

(a) the Council

(b) any of the Council's Committees, Sub-Committees, Panels, Forums, Joint Committees, Steering Groups, Working Groups or Area Committees whether or not the press and public are excluded from the meeting in question by virtue of a resolution of Members.

1.5 "Member" includes a co-opted Member. A co-opted Member is a person who is not an elected Councillor, but who is appointed by the Council to sit on any Committees, Sub-Committees, Panels, Forums, Joint Committees, Steering Groups, Working Groups or Area Committees due to their expertise and/or experience and who is entitled to vote, unless otherwise stated, on any question that falls to be decided at any Meeting.

Approach to publicity

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

2.2 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 established and emerging social media platforms.

3. Principles of communication

3.1 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

4. Official Council press releases

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

4.2 An official Council press release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole. Project Lead Members are responsible for drafting press releases for approval by the Chair, or Vice Chair in the Chair's absence. The Clerk (or other nominated Officer) will be responsible for checking and subsequently issuing any official press release on behalf of the Council.

4.3 All press releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Member. Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Members, identify a Member's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

4.4 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.

5. Requests for interview.

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

5.2 Where a Member 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.

5.3 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.

5.4 If a Member has not been specifically authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, a Member who is asked for a comment must decline and refer the enquiry to the Clerk for an official Council response.

6. Publicity during elections

6.1 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.

6.2 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.

7. Social media

7.1 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.

7.2 Social media sites 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 be approved by the Clerk (or other nominated Officer).

7.3 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.

7.4 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.

7.5 If a Member has not been specifically authorised by the Council to use social media on an issue, a Member who makes a comment should make it clear that it is a personal view made in their private capacity as a local resident.

7.6 Only the Clerk as appointed Social Media and Website Lead Member and one member ~~Chair~~ of the Parish Council are authorised to use the Council's Facebook page, subject to paragraph 7.2 above.

7.7 The Council's Facebook page (if any) is to be used for the publication of information only. Officers and Members are prohibited from using the Council's Facebook page to participate in commentary and/or debate on any matter. If members of the public ask questions and/or seek clarification on any matter, Officers and Members are to refer to paragraph 7.2 above. Approved engagement with members of the public via the Council's Facebook page will be limited to providing information, or signposting to the Clerk, or public meetings and will not engage with, or elicit debate and/or commentary.

8. Website

8.1 The Council's website(s) will be used to engage and communicate with residents. All communications and material issued by the Council on its website(s) will help provide a consistent message. To help achieve this, all material will be published by the Clerk or by the Chair in the Clerk's absence

8.2 In certain circumstances, it may be appropriate for a Member to draft information to be published on the website(s), but the Clerk will be responsible for checking and subsequently approving its publication.

8.3 Only the Clerk, or the an appointed Social Media and Website Lead Member and Chair of the Parish Council are authorised to update the Council's website(s), subject to paragraph 8.1 and 8.2 above.

8.4 Information obtained via the internet, or another third-party source and published in the Council's name on its website(s) must be relevant and professional. A disclaimer must be stated where personal views are expressed and the origins of the material.

8.5 The publication of any kind of offensive material on the Council's website(s) will not be tolerated and Members and Officers may be subject to disciplinary action.

9. General guidance for Members and Officers

9.1 Members 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 at Meetings, or at any other private briefing.

9.2 Members and Officers should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the Council or acting in such a way as to give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council.

9.3 Members should not use the prefix 'Councillor' or 'Member' when writing to the press or posting on social media as an individual. This implies you are stating Council policy, which is not necessarily consistent with your personal opinion.

9.4 Any Member 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.

9.5 Any Officer failing to follow the guidance set out in this policy could face disciplinary action.