

Witham Town Council: Press and Media Policy

Policy Overview

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Witham Town Council for working with the media and to deal with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.

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.

This policy covers all forms of media, including print, broadcast and digital channels such as news websites, social media platforms and community blogs.

KEY AIMS

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.

It is important that the press have access to the Town 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.

The Council will aim to provide information that is timely, accurate, lawful, politically impartial and accessible, reflecting the principles set out in relevant Government and Local Government Association guidance

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988, The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Transparency Code 2015, as a minimum. The Council must also have regard to the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

The Council will also have regard, where relevant, to guidance on publicity during the pre-election period to ensure that communications are lawful and not perceived as party-political.

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

Nothing in this policy overrides Members' obligations under the Councillor Code of Conduct, particularly in respect of confidentiality, respect, equality and the accurate presentation of information.

CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

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

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 is responsible and appropriate action will be taken.

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.

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 (although Member contact details are in the public domain unless otherwise notified); 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.

When responding to approaches from the media, only the Town Clerk is authorised to make contact with the media. Any Members approached directly by the media for comment are advised to first contact the Town Clerk.

Statements made by the Town Clerk and Members should reflect the Council's opinion.

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 Town Clerk.

Should a Member decide to submit a letter to the press on any subject they should not use the term 'Town Council' or give the impression, directly or implied, that they are writing on behalf of the Council.

When speaking to the media in a personal or ward capacity, Members should make it clear that they are expressing personal views and not necessarily those of WTC, and should take care that comments remain respectful and do not bring the Council into disrepute.

ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

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

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

In line with the openness provisions introduced in 2014, members of the public and media are permitted to film, photograph, record or use other digital means to report on meetings that are open to the public, subject to any reasonable rules adopted by the Council to minimise disruption. Where meetings move into confidential (excluded) session, the press and public will be asked to leave and any filming or recording must cease.

PRESS RELEASES

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 Town Clerk and Members to identify opportunities where the issuance of a press release may be beneficial.

All press releases must be issued by the Town Clerk to ensure that the principles outlined in section two (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Town Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

Wherever appropriate, press releases should be issued on behalf of the Council as a whole, rather than in the name of an individual Member, to reflect the Council's corporate nature and agreed decisions.

Draft press releases may, where relevant, be shared with the Chair or appropriate Committee Chair for comment prior to issue, particularly on sensitive or high-profile matters.

GENERAL GUIDANCE FOR MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

Any comments as recorded at Town Council/Committee Meetings or otherwise should be made to the press/media in a personal capacity and not as a spokesman for Council Policy. This should be made clear to the press/media at the time.

Members and officers should assume that anything said to a journalist, posted online or shared in a public forum could enter the public domain, and should therefore exercise care, accuracy and professionalism at all times.

Concerns about misreporting or inaccurate coverage should be raised with the Town Clerk in the first instance, who will consider the most appropriate response (for example, clarification, correction or complaint).

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