Kirton in Lindsey Town Council

Policy 24: Press & Media Policy

Reviewed and Adopted January 2022 (v.20221) [*FC2201/08*]

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Kirton in Lindsey Town Council (known as "the Council") for working with the press and media (known as "the media") and 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 to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, 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 Members 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 who primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”

3.2 In particular, Officers and Members 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 take appropriate action in accordance with the Standing Orders and 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 a number of personal privacy issues for Officers and Members 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 Member 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 Parish before any response is made to the media.

4. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk and the Mayor should be the authorised contact. However, if the subject of an enquiry relates to the work of one of the Council’s Committees, the authorised contact may be the Chair of that Committee.

4.2 Statements made must reflect the Council’s opinion.

4.3 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.

4.4 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 Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee. If individual Members choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.

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 minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets, if requested, 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 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 and workspace will be made available.

5.4 Any filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Clerk and Chair of the particular meeting.

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 particular 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, Chair 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 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 or not 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, Members 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 Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

7.2 Any Officer or Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk following agreement by the Council 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.

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 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 urgent actions being required in the absence of the Members and Officers with specific roles and responsibilities under this policy, the Deputy Mayor may act in the absence of the Mayor.

Signed…….. Town Council Chair

Name……

Date……...

Signed…….. Town Council Clerk

Name……

Date……...