



Parish Council Media And Communications Policy

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications.

The principles of this policy apply to Parish Councillors and Council staff and also to others communicating with the Parish Council.

This policy covers all forms of communication:

- Verbal communications
- Written communication both hand written and electronic
- Social media
- Communication with the press and media

GENERAL

Parish Councillors and Council staff when communicating with residents, suppliers, other authorities and partners, members of the press and each other must be mindful that their communication in both a personal and Council capacity is respectful and informative.

Yalding Parish Council will not deal with any correspondence or other matters if sent anonymously.

NOTICES

Notices are managed by The Parish Clerk

The Council noticeboards will be used for the advertising of agendas, sharing legal documents that require publication and other Council information.

The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news as well as advertising of agendas, publishing minutes and legal documents that require publication and will be updated regularly.

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

This provides guidance to Parish Councillors, Council staff and others who engage with the Council using online communications, collectively referred to as social media.

Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Parish Council Website
- Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- X (formally Twitter) and other micro blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Bloggs and discussion forums
- Email

The use of social media does not replace other forms of communication.

Individual Parish Councillors and Council staff are responsible for the content they post in a Council and personal capacity.

In the main, Councillors and Council staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

Social media may be used to:

- Distribute agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Good news stories, linked website or press page
- Vacancies
- Share information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc.
- Announce new information
- Post or share information from other Parish related community groups such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities
- Refer resident queries to The Clerk and all other Councillors

When using social media (including email) Parish Councillors and Council staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and Council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

Parish Councillors and Council staff must not:

- hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- present personal opinions as that of The Council
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to The Council
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of The Council
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- use an individual's name unless given written permission to do so
- publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- post any information that infringes copyright of others
- post any information that may be deemed libel
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- bring The Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence

Publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action and fine for damages. This also applies if someone else publishes something libellous on your, or a related, social media site. A successful libel claim will result in an award of damages against you.

Posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence. Breach of copyright will result in an award of damages against you.

Publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation and is an offence.

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence.

Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by The Council at a Council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Predetermination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at Council meetings.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, Council staff or residents should report them to The Clerk of The Council.

Misuse of social media content that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

The Council will appoint a nominated person as moderator of Parish Council social media output and be responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy.

Parish Council social media pages will be closed so that no outside third party may post on that page. However, there will be an email link from The Parish Council website to The Clerk's email address to allow members of the public to contact The Parish Council.

Yalding Parish Council will not comment on issues raised on social media, unless on its own page and will not respond to anonymous comments.

PRESS AND MEDIA POLICY

This defines the roles and responsibilities within Yalding Parish Council for working with the press and media and deals 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, 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.

KEY AIMS

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.

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 both Councillors and Council staff 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.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Governments 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 whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.

In particular, Councillors and Council staff should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of The Council in all their dealings 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 was responsible and take appropriate action in accordance with the Standing Orders and Code of Conduct adopted by The Council.

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 Monitoring Officer or The Council's solicitor before any response is made.

There are a number of personal privacy issues for Councillors and Council staff 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 Clerk before any response is made to the media.

CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

When responding to approaches from the media, The Chairman of The Council should be the authorised contact with the media in consultation with The Parish Clerk. However, if the subject of any enquiry relates to the work of one of The Council's Committees, The Chairman of the Council may delegate the authorised contact role to The Chairman of that Committee.

Statements made must reflect The Council's opinion.

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.

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.

Letters representing the views of The Council should only be issued by The Parish Clerk or Chairman 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 Parish Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of The Council or of an individual member.

At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of The Council.

ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS.

Agendas and minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets on request together with dates of meetings being available on The Council's website.

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

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

Any filming or taping of Council and Committee proceedings by the media should be with prior notice to The Parish Clerk and Chairman of the particular meeting.

ELECTIONS

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Members and for the 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 Chairman 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 positions 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.

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 of 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.

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 all Councillors and Council staff to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

Any Councillor or Council staff may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by The Parish Clerk or Chairman following agreement by The Council or relevant Committee in order to ensure that principles are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across The Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

URGENT SITUATIONS

In the case of an urgent letter or press release being required in advance of a Council or Committee meeting, this may be issued by The Parish Clerk with the agreement of The Chairman of The Council or relevant Committee following circulation of a draft version to other Members for comment.

In the case of urgent actions being required in the absence of the Councillor or Council staff with specific roles and responsibilities under the policy, the following delegations shall apply:

- The Vice Chairman of The Council may act in the absence of The Chairman.
- The Vice Chairman of a Committee may act in the absence of The Chairman.
- The Parish Clerk may act in the absence of The Vice Chairman of the Council or a Committee

Re-adopted on 2 July 2024

To be reviewed annually at the Annual Parish Council Meeting (see minutes of that meeting).