

GOSFORTH PARISH COUNCIL

PRESS AND MEDIA POLICY

Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Gosforth Parish Council for working with the media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Parish 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.

Keys Aims

The Parish 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 Parish Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Parish Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities. It is important that the press have access to the Clerk and Councillors, and to background information to assist them in giving accurate information to the public. The Parish 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 Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

Contact with The Media

The Clerk and Councillors should always have due regard for the 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 responsibility 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.

Whenever possible, any information given to the press shall be given in writing by the Clerk so as not to leave interpretation open to misunderstanding and misreporting.

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

When responding to approaches from the media, only the Clerk or the Chairperson are authorised to provide a response on behalf of the Parish Council. Statements made by the

Chairperson and the Clerk should reflect the Parish 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 Parish Council.

There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Parish 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.