

## Media and Communications Policy

September 2021

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### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Parish Council for achieving effective communication with the public, partners, and stakeholders through both traditional media and digital channels. It provides guidance on handling media enquiries, managing publicity, and using social media responsibly, so that all Council communications are consistent, accurate, and reflect the Council's agreed position.
- 1.2 Without proper co-ordination, it would be difficult to ensure that the messages put out by the Parish Council are consistent and accurate. However, if communication is managed effectively, the Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.
- 1.3 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 Councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.
- 1.4 Failure to follow the Council's Media and Communications Policy could lead to a breach of the statutory code and risk adverse publicity, which in turn could damage the Council's and relevant Councillor's reputation. It is important that all Councillors and Officers understand the implications of this code which this policy explains within a local context.
- 1.5 In short, the Council must ensure that publicity is
  - Lawful
  - Cost effective
  - Objective
  - Even-handed
  - Appropriate
  - Regard to equality and diversity
  - Careful during periods of heightened sensitivity
- 1.6 This policy should be read in conjunction with the Code of Conduct for Members.

### 2 Approach to Publicity

- 2.2 The Council welcomes enquiries from the press, media, and the public through digital and social media channels. It recognises that good relationships with journalists, broadcasters, and online communities help the Council to communicate effectively with residents and stakeholders.
- 2.3 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 social media.
- 2.4 In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be:
  - Open and honest



- Proactive
  - Responsive and timely
  - In line with the Code of Conduct for Members
- 2.5 The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions, and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communication. Traditional media and digital platforms, including social media, play a large role in informing residents about what the Council does and how it spends their money. It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively across all channels and, wherever possible, takes a positive and constructive approach to meeting requests for information, providing updates, and engaging with residents to increase public awareness of the Council’s priorities, services, and facilities.
- 2.6 The use of both traditional media and digital communication, including social media, is vital in terms of holding the Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that the public, partners, and the media have access to officers and Councillors, and to background information to assist them in this role. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from unfounded criticism and will ensure that residents are properly informed of all the relevant facts, using appropriate communication channels – including social media – where necessary.
- 2.7 The main communication channels relevant to Hamble are the local and regional press, local radio and television, and online and social media platforms used by residents. While it is unlikely that Hamble Parish Council will be involved in national or international publicity, this policy applies equally in those situations should they arise.

### 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 whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”

Furthermore, the Local Government Transparency Code (2014) requires Councils to operate a culture of transparency making information widely available to all that want to access and use it. This includes media organisations and those wishing to reuse the information for that purpose.



- 3.2 In particular, officers and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their communications — whether with the media, on social media, or through any other public forum.
- 3.3 Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers, and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media or to any public forum online. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and the appropriate action taken.
- 3.4 When the media, social media, or any other communication channel raises or discusses an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings, advice must 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 Councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home addresses and telephone numbers (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 Clerk before any response is made to the media or published online.

#### **4 Handling Media Enquiries**

- 4.1 All approaches from the media, including press, broadcast, online outlets, or via social media, should be directed to the Parish Clerk and the Chairman of the Council.
- 4.2 If other Councillors are contacted directly for comment - whether by journalists, through social media messages, or via other digital platforms - they should liaise with the Clerk before responding to the request.
- 4.3 All statements made by the Clerk or the Chairman should reflect the Council’s decisions and stated policies.
- 4.4 The Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Councillors. The phrase “no comment” should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.
- 4.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Chairman or the Clerk. Councillors are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the Local Press as a means of expressing their personal views.
- 4.6 At all times, Councillors, Officers, and staff should consider the potential risk to the Council, its reputation, and the reputation of other Councillors, when dealing with the media.

#### **5 Requests for Interview**

- 5.1 Any request for an interview with a Councillor or Officer should be referred to the Clerk in the first instance. The Clerk, in liaison with the Chairman, will determine the most appropriate Councillor or Officer to put forward for interview.
- 5.2 Where a Councillor 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 Councillor has not been specifically authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, a Councillor who is asked for a comment should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as such.

## 6 Official Council Press Releases

- 6.1 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 Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 6.2 All press releases are to be factual, non-political, not written to cause offence, and must be in accordance with Council policy.
- 6.3 All press releases are to be drafted and issued by the Clerk to ensure that the principles outlined in Section 3 (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, having consulted with the Chairman of the relevant committee on the proposed wording.
- 6.4 Press releases will be issued to local newspapers and copies will be made available on the Council's website. An edited version will be shared on the Council's social media platforms, with a link to the full story.

## 7 Social Media and Digital Communications

- 7.1 The Council recognises that social media and digital platforms are important tools for engaging with residents, partners, and stakeholders. Used positively, they can promote the work of the Council, support transparency, and encourage community participation. This section sets out how Councillors and employees must use social media in line with the principles established elsewhere in this policy.
- 7.2 This section applies to all Councillors, employees, and representatives of Hamble Parish Council when using social media:
- On behalf of the Council through official channels; and
  - In a personal capacity where there is, or could reasonably be perceived to be, an association with the Council.
- 7.3 Social media includes, but is not limited to, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, blogs, forums, and community discussion sites.
- 7.4 The principles of confidentiality, accuracy, integrity, and accountability set out in the rest of this policy apply equally to all social media use. In particular:
- Information shared must be factual, objective, and in line with agreed Council decisions.
  - Confidential or sensitive material must never be disclosed.
  - Content must be respectful, non-political, and must not bring the Council into disrepute.
  - When making personal posts, individuals must take care that their comments cannot be interpreted as representing the official position of the Council.
- 7.5 The Clerk is responsible for authorising and overseeing all official Council social media accounts. Officers may prepare material for publication, but posts should be cleared with the Clerk unless they relate to routine service information or factual updates.



- 7.6 Councillors should seek advice from the Clerk before commenting publicly on Council business or sensitive community issues.
- 7.7 Official accounts must not be used for political purposes or to promote individual Councillors.
- 7.8 Councillors and employees must not disclose confidential information, pre-empt Council decisions (for example, on planning applications), or make defamatory or disparaging remarks about the Council, colleagues, or stakeholders. Where individuals express personal opinions on matters connected to the Council, they must make it clear that they are speaking in a personal capacity.

## **8 Attendance of Media at Council or Committee Meetings**

- 8.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports, and minutes are sent to the media on request, five working days prior to the meeting.
- 8.2 Provision is made for Councillors of the media to attend Council and committee meetings. During meetings Councillors should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what may be a complex issue.

## **9 Publicity During Elections**

- 9.1 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.
- 9.2 During the purdah period, all Council publicity shall be managed by the Clerk. Any official statements, whether for press releases, social media, the Council's website, or other communication channels, will only be issued by authorised officers.
- 9.3 The Council will not quote any Councillor in a press 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, Councillors holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

## **10 Non-Council Related Media**

- 10.1 Officers and Councillors of the Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as Councillors of non-Council related organisations must not refer to their Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.

## **11 Managing Negative Issues**

- 11.1 From time to time the Council must respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for reputational damage or adverse publicity, whether in the press, broadcast media, online, or on social media.
- 11.2 Councillors must alert the Clerk and Chairman as soon as a potentially negative issue is known which may attract media or social media interest. They should not wait until they are contacted by a journalist or until the issue begins to circulate online.



## 12 Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

- 12.1 Should the media, social media, or any other communication channel publish or circulate something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision must be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the Clerk to decide what response is appropriate. This could include a press release, a statement on the Council's website or social media accounts, direct contact with the journalist or platform concerned, a personal letter to the editor, or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who is the most appropriate person to take the agreed action.
- 12.2 It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain; each case should be judged individually.
- 12.3 Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising, and stating how the Council will learn from the error or put it right.

## 13 Freedom of Information and Data Protection

- 13.1 Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt. The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.
- 13.2 In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 1998 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Councillors should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by residents.

## 14 General Guidance for Councillors and Officers

- 14.1 Councillors and officers must ensure they do not disclose information of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press, social media, digital platforms, or other communication channels on matters which have been discussed under confidential items on Council or committee agendas, or at any other private briefing.
- 14.2 Councillors and officers should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of the council.
- 14.3 Councillors should not use the prefix 'Councillor' when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating Council policy, which is not necessarily consistent with your personal opinion.
- 14.4 Any Councillor failing to follow the guidelines set out in this policy may find themselves in breach of the Code of Conduct for Members and subject to a complaint to the Monitoring Officer.
- 14.5 Any officer failing to follow the guidance set out in this policy could face disciplinary action as set out in the Staff Handbook.

