

THRAPSTON TOWN COUNCIL

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PRESS AND MEDIA POLICY

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Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the 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, it provides guidance on how to deal with issues that may arise when dealing with the media.

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 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 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.

Contact with the media

The Clerk and Members 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 appropriate action taken. Wherever possible all communications with the press and media should be made through the Clerk. The Clerk, as the Proper Officer of the Council, is authorised to receive all communications from the press and media and to issue press statements on behalf of the Council in consultation with the Chairman. In the absence of the Clerk, media communications will be handled by the Chairman, in consultation with the Vice-Chairman.

Press releases may be issued proactively to alert the media to a potential story, provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. Press releases made on behalf of the Council will normally be prepared by the Clerk following any meetings of the Council or Committees. If press releases are drafted by any Councillor, they must be issued by the Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman of Council or relevant Committee. A direct approach by the Council to the media seeking an interview, issuing a statement or press release or to publish an article may only be made with authorisation from the Council or relevant committee, except in the case of an urgent matter, with insufficient time for a Council meeting, when the Clerk is authorised to publish statements in consultation with the Chairman.

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 NALC or 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); 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.

Statements made by the Chairman or the Chairman of Committees and the Clerk should reflect the Council's stated policy or opinion. They should not speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council.

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. Councillors should be aware that according to case law the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. Councillors must therefore be careful about expressing individual views to the press or media, whether or not they relate to matters of Thrapston Town Council business. Whilst it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that s/he voted against a policy if this took place in an open session, Councillors should not seek to undermine a decision through the press.

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 Clerk.

Attendance of media at Council meetings

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that 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.

Meetings of the Council, its committees and sub-committees are open to the public and press unless the Council resolves that their presence is prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted or for other special reasons.

In accordance with standing orders, persons may be required to leave a meeting if their disorderly behaviour obstructs the business of the meeting.

Where meetings include time for public participation and subject to the Council's standing orders, media representatives may speak and ask questions. The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 has amended section 1 of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 to require Councils to permit any person (including the press) who attends a Council (or committee) meeting to report on the proceedings of the meeting except where the Council has resolved to exclude the public. The new provisions address the existence of different means of reporting, including the use of social media. The "press" in the widest terms includes traditional print media, filming crews, hyperlocal journalists and bloggers.

The Council is not required by the Regulations to permit oral reporting or oral commentary on a meeting as it takes place if the person reporting or providing the commentary is present at the meeting (e.g. running a verbal commentary while filming) which could be disruptive.

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 Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk in order 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.

The Town Council reserves the right to amend and update this policy from time to time.

Adopted by Thrapston Town Council

12th November 2019

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Chairman

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Town Clerk