



**FAIR OAK & HORTON HEATH PARISH COUNCIL**

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# CONSTITUTION

## CHAPTER 17

# COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Adopted

17 July 2023

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. If communication is managed effectively, the Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with stakeholders and the public to build an accurate and positive reputation.
- 1.2. This protocol acts as a simple reference tool for any Cllrs or member of staff who engages with the media. It can clarify roles and responsibilities and help manage expectations.
- 1.3. The purpose of this protocol is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of Cllrs and staff in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest.
- 1.4. The Council recognises the need for openness, and this should be reflected in how the media communications are dealt with.
- 1.5. The aim of the protocol is to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's approach should be:
  - open and honest
  - proactive
  - responsive and timely

## **2. The Legal Context**

- 2.1. This protocol reflects the guidance to town & parish councils contained in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 in which the following principles are listed:
- 2.2. Publicity by local authorities should:
  - be lawful
  - be cost effective
  - be objective
  - be even- handed
  - be appropriate
  - have regard to equality and diversity
  - be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity; and the Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions
- 2.3. This protocol will also explain how Fair Oak & Horton Heath Parish Council will help achieve the following objectives:
  - Share and celebrate success

- Give information about policies, services and events, and about the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council's work
- Handle negative issues clearly and decisively

### **3. The Media**

- 3.1. Local and regional newspapers, independent radio, and TV as well as national media have all covered stories relating to Fair Oak & Horton Heath in recent years. In addition, the internet and social media are vital media to disseminate local news.

### **4. Identifying Newsworthy Items**

- 4.1. It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify worthy news items as early as possible and to share this with the Council's Communications & Events Officer.

### **5. Handling Media Enquiries**

- 5.1. The Communications & Events Officer, supported by the Clerk will be responsible for all media enquiries and responses.
- 5.2. However, staff are encouraged to take responsibility and deal with requests themselves if they feel comfortable.
- 5.3. Cllrs who are directly approached by the media should respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol.
- 5.4. The Council should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual Cllrs and staff. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

### **6. News Releases**

- 6.1. News releases are one of the techniques for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements. They appear on our website and social media feeds.
- 6.2. There are two types of news releases - Official Council News Releases and Councillor News Releases.
- 6.3. Official Council Press Releases - An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole. It is non-party political and will normally include a quote from a relevant Councillor(s).
- 6.4. Official Council press releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a web-based record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council.
- 6.5. News Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, or persuade the general public to hold a particular

view.

6.6. It should be borne in mind that a news release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and alternative ways of communicating it should be considered e.g., posters, mailings, websites, social media etc. The Council's Communications & Events Officer will determine the most appropriate form of engagement.

6.7. Councillor News Releases - Councillor news releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. They should be clear that the release is from Cllr X, Y ward to make it clear that it has not been issued by the Council. They may or may not be political and should not include the name of any staff member, use the Council crest or the Council telephone number as a point of contact.

## **7. Interviews**

7.1. Staff should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.

## **8. Media at Council meetings**

8.1. The media is welcome to attend meetings. During meetings, Cllrs and staff 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 can be a complex issue or report.

## **9. Publicity in Election Periods**

9.1. The rules governing publicity change 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 or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections. Conversely, Council business and the publicity associated with can and should continue.

9.2. During this period council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Cllrs or groups of Cllrs. This is to make sure that no individual Cllr or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

9.3. In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant member of staff may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this protocol. The Clerk is able to advise on the detail of Purdah.

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

10.1. Cllrs and staff who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members 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 has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.
- 11.2. Cllrs and staff must alert the Clerk and Communications Officer as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest comes to light. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.
- 11.3. The Communications & Events Officer will prepare holding statements, and other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

## **12. Correcting Inaccurate Reporting**

- 12.1. Should the media publish something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken by the Clerk on any action necessary to correct it.
- 12.2. This could be a letter, email, a post on social media or a news release, or in exceptional circumstances to take legal advice. 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 correct inaccuracies. Each case must 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 accepting responsibility, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.

## **13. Monitoring and Evaluation**

- 13.1. The Council will continually monitor the media coverage and collate it.

## **14. Freedom of Information and Data Protection**

- 14.1. Cllrs are reminded that they must not misuse Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (email or written), normally that correspondence would have to be disclosed, unless it was exempt. The fact that the disclosure of the correspondence may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.
- 14.2. In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data and the Council will follow the requirements under the Data Protection Act 2018.

## **15. Internet Acceptable Use Policy**

- 15.1. Internet use covers all the Council websites, social networking sites such as Facebook, forums and blogs and both Cllrs and staff are encouraged to use them.

15.2. If the above are used in an official capacity or on Council related business, the guidance in this protocol must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

15.3. Under the consideration of Acceptable Use, when acting in the capacity of Fair Oak & Horton Heath Parish Council, websites and social media should not:

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or used for political campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner

15.4. If social media is used in an unofficial capacity, Cllrs and staff should restrain from making remarks that could be construed as bringing the Council into disrepute.

15.5. The above points should provide useful guidance to prevent misinterpretation.

15.6. It is best practice on any personal profile for an online social media account to state clearly that the views are those of the individual and may not represent the views of the Parish Council. It is also advised that the Council's logo or any other Council-related material is not used on a personal online account, for example, a website, blog or social media platform as a profile picture or icon representing that account.

15.7. The following dangers could occur with the personal or Council use of social media (please note this is not an exhaustive list):

- Sharing images or personal details could lead to the exploitation of vulnerable people or groups
- Breaching a code of conduct, for example the 7 Principles of Public Life through tactless posting and commenting
- Bullying, instigating or fuelling online persecution or inappropriate debate through thoughtless posting and commenting
- Civil or criminal action taken against account holders relating to breaches of legislation
- Damage to a councillor's reputation or a Council's reputation
- The accidental or intentional release of confidential information
- Virus or malware attacks through online sites or downloads compromising systems or networks relating to Council business

15.8. In light of these risks, we should all be mindful and practice safe social media use and

ensure that:

- A consistent and considered approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media by councillors and staff
- Be aware that copyright laws do apply online
- Make sure Council information remains confidential where necessary and is not compromised through the use of social media - including blogging and websites (by individual or group use)
- Councillors adhere to the policies set out by various social media sites they are using and are up-to-date with relevant legislation
- Councillors and staff should be conscious that they are and will be held personally responsible for content they publish (including 'commenting') on any form of social media - whether during or out of office hours. It should also be noted that an untrue statement or breach of a particular code of conduct may incur a libel action against an individual.
- Councillors and staff should remember that social media sites are in the public domain and information published can be readily distributed by others. Even if a post is deleted or taken down it has a life span that someone could have seen and distributed.
- Councillors and staff must be aware and mindful that when using social media in a personal capacity it is expected they behave appropriately and in line with the Council's values and policies in the constitution. Any inappropriate online activity may result in disciplinary action.

15.9. Any Councillor receiving unwelcomed comments, threats, or harassment online should report it to the police. Any staff member should report it to the police and their line manager. If you feel your account is being attacked by someone acting as a 'Troll' it is best practice to ignore this person or persons and report the issue to the social media site on which the problem is occurring. There are also a number of options in relation to 'blocking' a person if the behaviour is particularly upsetting or abusive.

## **16. Young People and Publicity**

16.1. Guidelines should be followed if commissioning photographs of children (i.e. under 18 years of age) or if planning photography of children at events and using visual media for publicity purposes. Please refer to the Council's Data Protection and GDPR Policy for more information.

## **17. Monitoring**

17.1. The Clerk, supported by the Communications & Events Officer will regularly monitor the application and effectiveness of this policy and will suggest amendments where necessary.