



PORTLAND TOWN COUNCIL

PRESS AND MEDIA POLICY

Policy Number	Version	Owner	Date Adopted	Review Date
017	24-04-2023	Council	Full Council 17-05-2023	March 2027
	Review		Full Council 15-05-2024	March 2027

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Portland Town Council for working with the press and media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.
- 1.2 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, provide information on Council services.

2. KEY AIMS

- 2.1. 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 policies and priorities.
- 2.2. 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 Officers and Members 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.

3. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- 3.1. This policy is subject to the councils' statutory obligations set out in the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 1998, and the Councils Standing Orders. The Council must also have regard to the Government's Recommended Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

4. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

- 4.1. Statements made must reflect the Council's opinion.
- 4.2. Any Member may 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.
- 4.3. 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.
- 4.4. Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Clerk 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 the information with the Clerk. It should always be made clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or those of an individual Member.
- 4.5. At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.
- 4.6. Unexpected approaches from representatives of the media can lead to unguarded comments being made and great care must be therefore taken to avoid misrepresentation of the council's policy or its position on the matter in question.

- 4.7. Reporters should be directed to contact the Clerk if they want to carry out an interview or obtain a statement about the Council's business and actions.
- 4.8. Except in the most straightforward cases, the caller should be informed that a statement will be made within 24 hours, and they should be asked to set out clearly what they want to know. This will allow time for the Clerk to consult with the Chair or relevant Committee Chairs, in producing a response within a reasonable time.
- 4.9. Any verbal or written statement given by the Clerk must represent the corporate position and views of the Council not the individual views of Members or staff held in their official capacity.
- 4.10. Where the matters concerned have not been discussed by the Council, an immediate response cannot be made, and this should be made clear to the enquirer. The Clerk should then consult with the Chair or relevant Committee Chairs for a response, which may be 'no comment.'
- 4.11. Officers and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- 4.12. 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.
- 4.13. 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.
- 4.14. There are a number of personal privacy issues for Officers and Members 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, 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.

5. ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- 5.1. The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports, and minutes be sent to the media on request, prior to the meeting.
- 5.2. Seating will be made available should the media wish to attend Council and Committee meetings.

6. ELECTIONS

- 6.1. The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Members and for 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 position they hold in the Council.

7. Pre-Election Period

- 7.1. The pre-election period, previously known as 'purdah', describes the period of time immediately before elections or referendums when specific restrictions on communications activity are in place. The term 'heightened sensitivity' is also used.
- 7.2. In the years when elections occur, during periods from the issue of the Notice of Election until the day of the Election, Officers will issue no releases quoting Council Members. During "Pre-Election Period" any quotes will be from Officers only.

8. PRESS RELEASES

- 8.1. 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 Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a pressrelease may be beneficial.
- 8.2. The Clerk will use their own judgement and support those opportunities for a press release, as identified in paragraph 8.1.

9. NOTICES

- 9.1. The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by officers.
- 9.2. The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of council information.

10.SOCIAL MEDIA

- 10.1. With the rise in the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, Members and Officers need to be fully aware of the implications of using these products. All social media should only be used to present information about the Council or its decisions, where the person posting the information is identified as being associated with the Council.
- 10.2. The Council has Facebook. This will be used by Officers to provide and share information on services and events in Portland that may be of interest to the community.
- 10.3. Officers and Councillors are expected to read and comply with the Councils' Electronic Communication and Social Media Policy.