

MERTON PARISH COUNCIL

Press & Media Policy.

This document sets out Merton Parish Councils approved and agreed practices. Any deviation must be made by resolution of the full Council and recorded below.

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Document to be signed when face to face meetings resume.

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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. All mediums for communication 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 & Councillors 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 governments **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 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 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.

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 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.

All formal requests for comment regarding Merton Parish Council (MPC) policy on any matter should be directed to the Clerk in the first instance. If unavailable, the Chairperson should be contacted.

When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or Chairman are authorised to make contact with the media. All responses to the press should be drafted by the Chairperson with the assistance of the Clerk for accuracy regarding MPC current policy on the matter being responded to and its lawfulness.

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Responses drafted on any matter may however be directed to another councillor with the assistance of the Clerk and others for accuracy and lawfulness.

In this instance the Chairperson should be made fully aware of the response and agree to its contents.

Statements made by the Chairman and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion. If MPC does not have an official position on the matter raised, this should be stated as MPC current position.

Other Councillors can communicate with the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council. Councillors are at liberty to communicate with the press in their own right as representatives of their wards. However, they must always maintain that they speak as individuals and not on behalf of MPC as per the Code of Conduct.

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.

On 6 August 2014, **the 1960 Act was amended by the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 (“the 2014 Regulations”)**. **The amended 1960 Act** provides that a person may not orally report or comment about a meeting as it takes place if he is present at the meeting of a parish council or its committees but otherwise may:

- film, photograph or make an audio recording of a meeting;
- use any other means for enabling persons not present to see or hear proceedings at a meeting as it takes place or later;
- report or comment on the proceedings in writing during or after a meeting or orally report or comment after the meeting.

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 Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

The Clerk or any Councillor 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.