



Wylam Parish Council

PRESS AND MEDIA POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Wylam Parish Council (“the Council”) for working with the media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and those whose work involves gathering material for editorial publication in print, broadcast and electronic form (“the media”). Where information is not available via the Council’s Publication Scheme, the Council shall endeavor to assist the media with enquiries about the Council’s functions, decisions and actions.
- 1.2 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.

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 the media to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.
- 2.2 The media 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 the Clerk 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 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 this 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 explanations 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.”*

3.2 The Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

4. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 The Clerk and Members should always have due regards for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

4.2 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 in accordance with the Standing Orders and Code of Conduct adopted by the Council.

4.3 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.

4.4 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.

4.5 All formal requests for comment regarding Wylam Parish Council policy on any matter should be directed to the Clerk in the first instance.

- 4.6 When responding to approaches from the media, the Chairman of the Council or the Clerk are authorised to make contact with the media. All responses to the media should be drafted by the Chairman with the assistance of the Clerk for accuracy regarding the Council's current policy on the matter being responded to and its lawfulness.
- 4.7 If the subject of the enquiry relates to the work of one of the Council's committees, the Chairman of the Council may delegate the authorised contact role to the Chairman of that Committee with the assistance of the Clerk and others for accuracy and lawfulness. In this instance, the Chairman of the Council should be made fully aware of the response and agree to its contents.
- 4.8 Statements made by the Chairman and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion. If the Council does not have an official position on the matter raised, this should be stated as Wylam Parish Council's current position.
- 4.9 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 media in their own right, but must always maintain that they speak as individuals and not on behalf of Wylam Parish Council.
- 4.10 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. 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.
- 4.11 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 first check their facts with the Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.
- 4.12 At all times, consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

5. ATTENDANCE OF THE MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.

- 5.2 The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.
- 5.3 On 6 August 2014, the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 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.

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 particular position they hold on the Council.

7. PRESS RELEASES

- 7.1 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 the Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 7.2 The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, but they must all be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in Sections 3 and 4 above (Legal Framework; Contact with the Media) are adhered to , that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

8. NOTICES

- 8.1 The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Parish Clerk and other authorised Members with the assistance of the webmaster.
- 8.2 The Council notice boards, including that at Wylam Library, will be used for the advertising of agendas, minutes and other Council information.

9. URGENT SITUATIONS

- 9.1 In the case of an urgent letter or press release being required in advance of a Council or Committee meeting, this may be issued by the Clerk with the agreement of the Chairman of the Council or relevant Committee following circulation of a draft version to other Members for comment.
- 9.2 In the case of urgent actions being required in the absence of the Clerk and Members with specific roles and responsibilities under this policy, the following delegations shall apply:
- a. The Vice-Chairman of the Council may act in the absence of the Chairman;
 - b. The Vice-Chairman of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chairman;
 - c. The Clerk may act in the absence of the Vice-Chairman of the Council or a Committee.

This Press and Media Policy was adopted by Wylam Parish Council at its meeting held on:
(Minute Reference)