



Okehampton Town Council

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## Dealing with the Press/Media Policy

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Town Council for working with the media and 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.

### **Keys 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, including press, radio, television and the 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 has access to the Town 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.

### **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 including exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be provided to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place and appropriate action taken.

When the media wishes to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then legal advice should be taken 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 and telephone number (although Councillor 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.

When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk and Mayor are authorised to contact or respond to the press. Statements made by the Clerk and Mayor must be factual and reflect the Council's opinion.

Other Councillors can respond to the media but must ensure it is clear that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council as a corporate body.

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 long periods. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.

### **Attendance of Media at Council Meetings**

The right to record, film and to broadcast meetings of the Town Council, its committees and sub committees was established following the Local Government Audit and Accountability Act 2014. The “Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014” became active legislation in August 2014.

This is in addition to the rights of the press and public to attend such meetings.

### **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 the 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.