

Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to guide both councillors and officers of the council in their relations with the press and media, in such a way as to ensure the smooth running of the Council.

This policy does not seek to be either prescriptive or comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with the press and media.

Above everything else, a councillor must observe Warminster Town Council's Code of Conduct whenever he/she conducts the business of the authority, conducts the business of the office to which he/she has been elected/appointed or acts as a representative of the authority.

Town clerk and officers of the council, the town clerk as the proper officer of the council is authorised to receive all communications from the press and media and to issue press statements on behalf of the council in line with the minutes of the council, its committees and sub-committees. In the absence of the town clerk, media communications will be handled by the assistant town clerk.

In the absence of both of these officers' enquirers will be referred to the Mayor/council chairman who will act as the spokesperson for the purposes of this element of the policy.

All communications made by the town clerk will relate to the stated business and day to day management of the activities or adopted policy of the council. The clerk is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the council. Where such questions are put to the town clerk, they should refer the enquirer to the Mayor/council chairman or a committee chairman as considered appropriate.

No other officer of the council, unless authorised by the town clerk, is permitted to speak, or communicate with the press and media on any matter affecting the council or its business without prior agreement with the clerk or council/committee chairman.

Members of the Council

A councillor must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on council or committee agendas or at any other private briefing.

A councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Warminster Town Council. When speaking or providing written material to the press and media, members should make clear the capacity, in which they are providing the information. For

example: - as mayor as chairman of a committee, as an individual (i.e. letter to press for publication) as spokesperson.

Never use the prefix “councillor” when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating council policy. A copy of any written material sent to the press and media by a member, as representing the council, must be forwarded to the town clerk.

Take particular care if the press or media approach you for comment on a controversial subject, and do not be led into stating something you did not really mean to say. If unsure about any particular policy, simply state “no comment” and ask the press to contact the council offices. Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful about expressing individual views to the press or media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business. Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made and whilst it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in an open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the press. A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer at meetings held in public or before the press. Dealing with the Press When dealing with the Press verbally, members and officers should be aware of the following: Be informed and certain of all your facts Ensure that when making comments on behalf of the Town Council that you are aware what Council Policy is and that your comments reflect that policy. Be calm Ensure that your comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or its staff into disrepute and ensure that comments are neither libellous nor slanderous. Issues to be Aware of Councillors and officers not used to dealing with the press may be surprised when they see that statements made in all innocence look very different in print than they did when they were spoken. It is advantageous to write out a statement or position beforehand. Meetings of Council and Committees Copies of Agendas, Minutes and Reports sent to Members for meetings of the Council or its Committees will be e-mailed to the Press and Media. Facilities will be provided at meetings for the Press to take notes of the proceedings. As provided in the Council’s Standing Orders both the Press and Public may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion. [Note: The Town Council as a Parish Council is governed by the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act, 1960. Press Releases All press releases made on behalf of the Town Council will be prepared or overseen by the Town Clerk following any meetings of Committees, Subcommittees, Working and Steering Groups. The Town Clerk, in consultation with the Town Mayor, is also authorised to publish press releases on any urgent matters where there is insufficient time for a council meeting. This document has been prepared as a guidance note for officers and elected members. It represents the policy of the Council in respect of its relationships with the Press and Media. The policy has been prepared to ensure consistency in the Council’s dealing with the Press and Media and details who is authorised to speak on behalf of the Council. It has been drafted to ensure that the views and policy of the Council are presented accurately.