



PRESS, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION POLICY

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Rotherfield Parish Council (known as "the Council") for working with the press and media (known as "the media") and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media. Communications via other means such as Social Media, Parish Council website and Council noticeboards is also covered by this policy.
- 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, to debate issues in the public arena.

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 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 (March 2011). Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy: -
 - "Where local authority publicity addresses matters of political controversy it should seek to present the different positions in relation to the issue in question in a fair manner".



Working for the Community in Rotherfield, Mark Cross, Eridge Green, Boarshead and surrounding areas

- “Any publicity describing the council’s policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on the facts or explanation or both. 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 In particular, Officers and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 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.
- 3.5 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 General Data Protection. These issues include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone numbers (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 Parish Clerk before any response is made to the media.

4 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

- 4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Chairman of the Council should be the authorised contact with the media in consultation with the Parish Clerk. However, if the subject of an 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.
- 4.2 Statements made must reflect the Council’s opinion. If practicable, to assist with accuracy it is preferred that such statements are in writing,
- 4.3 Other Councillors can 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.
- 4.4 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

Clerk: Adam Hardy, 3 Trinity Mews, Mill Crescent, Crowborough, East Sussex TN6 2QU

Tel: 07969512099. Email: clerk@rotherfieldparishcouncil.co.uk

Parish Council Website: www.rotherfieldparishcouncil.co.uk Twitter [@rotherfieldpc](https://twitter.com/rotherfieldpc) and on Facebook



Working for the Community in Rotherfield, Mark Cross, Eridge Green, Boarshead and surrounding areas

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.

- 4.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee if necessary. In some circumstances it is recognised that the signature of the Chairman on a letter issued by the Clerk may be appropriate e.g. on letters of thanks or congratulation to Parishioners or Parish Organisations/businesses.

If individual Members choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Parish Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.

- 4.6 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.
- 4.7 All of the above shall apply equally to postings by Councillors on Social Media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook.

5 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- 5.1 Agendas and minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets together with dates of meetings being available on the Council's website.
- 5.2 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes be sent to the media on request, prior to the meeting.
- 5.3 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings.
- 5.4 Filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings is governed by item 1m) of the Standing Orders which state "Photographing, recording, broadcasting or transmitting the proceedings of a meeting by any means is not permitted without the Council's prior written consent".

6 ELECTIONS

- 6.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (March 2011) 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 in the Council. These extracts from the Code illustrate the main points: -



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- "During the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, local authorities should not publish any publicity on controversial issues or report views or proposals in such a way that identifies them with any individual members or groups of members. Publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published by local authorities during this period unless expressly authorised by or under statute. It is permissible for local authorities to publish factual information, which identifies the names, wards and parties of candidates at elections".
- "Local authorities should pay particular regard to the legislation governing publicity during the period of heightened sensitivity before elections and referendums".

- 6.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the Council. In this situation, Members holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

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 all Officers and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 7.2 Any Officer or Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee 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.

8 URGENT SITUATIONS

- 8.1 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 Parish Clerk with the agreement of the Chairman of the Council or relevant Committee following circulation of a draft version to other Members for comment.



Working for the Community in Rotherfield, Mark Cross, Eridge Green, Boarshead and surrounding areas

- 8.2 In the case of urgent actions being required in the absence of the Members and Officers 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 Parish Clerk may act in the absence of the Vice Chairman of the Council or a Committee.

9 COUNCIL NOTICEBOARDS AND WEBSITE.

- The Council noticeboards are primarily for the display of agenda and other statutory notices relating to the Council's business and notices from the District and County Council's, Central Government and other statutory bodies. Subject to the availability of space, notices from local or national not-for-profit organisations considered as being of interest to the Parishioners may also be displayed. The Clerk is to be responsible for maintaining the information on the noticeboards and ensuring that the information therein is up to date.
- The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news, together with agenda of forthcoming meetings and archive minutes from Council meetings, also notices from the District and County Council, Central Government and other statutory bodies. The Clerk is responsible for keeping the information on the site up to date. Information from local or national not for profit organisations considered as being of interest to the Parishioners may also be displayed.
- Businesses requesting that the Council display information on their behalf should be referred to the editor of the Parish Magazine with the suggestion that an advertisement may be placed.

10 NEWSLETTERS AND PARISH MAGAZINE

Two of the Criteria for granting of "Quality Council" status is that the Council should undertake the following: -

- Publish an Annual Report.
- Provide regular information to residents on parish council activities.

The annual report should be published and delivered to every household in the Parish once the annual accounts are completed and approved by the Finance and General-Purpose Committee. The annual report should also be made available on the Parish Council Website and Social Media outlets.



Working for the Community in Rotherfield, Mark Cross, Eridge Green, Boarshead and surrounding areas

The Deputy Clerk shall provide the Parish Magazine with the dates of forthcoming meetings monthly in time for their press deadline (usually around the 20th of the month), this to ensure that the information appears in the relevant edition.

In addition, and at least quarterly, a report summarising recent decisions and progress with ongoing projects, will be submitted for publication. Other articles may be submitted on an "ad hoc" basis relating to items of information or interest to the Parishioners relating to the Parish Council.

Articles for publication may be compiled by any member of the Council but should be submitted to the Deputy Clerk for checking of the information contained therein before submission.

UPDATES AND AMENDMENTS

Meeting change	approving	Details
18 th December 2014	Monthly meeting	Section 4.5 updated with addition of narrative allowing Council Chair to sign letters in certain circumstances.
25 th November 2018		General editing and rebranding. AH
25 th February 2021		Addition of Assistant Clerk duties. AH
10 th May 2023		Changes to Clerking roles AH

Adopted: May 2023

Review Date: May 2024