

# DUNSFOLD PARISH COUNCIL

## Communications (including Press and Media) Policy

Approved 15/08/2023

### 1. Introduction and background

- 1.1. The purpose of this policy is to guide both Councillors and staff of the Council in their relations with the Press and Media (hereafter “press”), in such a way as to facilitate the smooth running of the Council.
- 1.2. It also puts in place a process for the Parish Council to consistently manage its website content and, if applicable, its Social Media presence.
- 1.3. This policy does not seek to be either prescriptive or comprehensive, nor to curb freedom of speech, but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with the press in respect of Parish Council business. Its contents are based on the SLCC model policy (2019 version), together with a similar policy adopted by another local parish council.
- 1.4. 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 Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
- 1.5. The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should also be adhered to. Above everything else, a Councillor must observe Dunsfold Parish Council's adopted Code of Members' Conduct whenever he/she acts in the role of a member.

### 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 press and media – including printed 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 particular policies and priorities.
- 2.2. 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.

### 3. General

- 3.1. Any one or more of the Clerk, the Chair and Vice Chair are authorised to make contact with the press and/or make statements to the press on behalf of the Parish Council. There are occasions when it is

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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, Chair or Vice Chair.

- 3.2.** Such statements made by the Chair, Vice Chair or the Clerk to the press under 3.1 should reflect the Council's opinion, where opinion is required. Usually, the best way to ensure that is the case is by circulating a draft, providing Councillors with a reasonable opportunity to comment and taking into account those comments before publication - although it is recognised that time pressures may mean that that is not always possible. The Chair, Vice Chair and Clerk should exercise reasonable discretion over the contents of any statement containing opinion and which has not been circulated beforehand.
- 3.3.** Otherwise, all Councillors are free to talk to the press in respect of Parish Council business but must take care that it is clear that any opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Parish Council as a whole.
- 3.4.** When dealing with the press verbally, Councillors and officers should be aware of the following:
  - 3.4.1.** Be informed and certain of all your facts.
  - 3.4.2.** Ensure that when making comments on behalf of the Parish Council that you are aware what the relevant Council Policy is (if applicable) and that your comments reflect that policy.
  - 3.4.3.** Be calm.
  - 3.4.4.** 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.
- 3.5.** 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.

#### **4. Staff**

- 4.1.** An officer 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 the Council's or Committees' agenda or at any other private briefing.
- 4.2.** An officer should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Dunsfold Parish Council.
- 4.3.** All communications made by the 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 Clerk, the Clerk should refer the enquirer to the appropriate Chair of the relevant Committee, or in absence of a committee, to the Chair or Vice Chair of the Council.
- 4.4.** No other officer of the Council or member of staff apart from the above, unless authorised by the Clerk, is permitted to speak or communicate with the press on any matter affecting the Council or its business.

## **5. Members of the Council**

- 5.1.** 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 the Council's or Committees' agenda or at any other private briefing.
- 5.2.** A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Dunsfold Parish Council.
- 5.3.** When speaking or providing written material to the press in respect of Parish Council matters, Councillors should make clear the capacity in which they are providing the information. For example: - as Chair of the Council, as Chairman of a Committee, as a Parish Councillor, or as an individual.
- 5.4.** Never use the prefix "Cllr" when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating Council policy. Bear in mind that in doing so you are likely to be viewed as acting in the capacity of a member of the Council (engaging the Code of Members' Conduct).
- 5.5.** Take particular care if the press 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 Parish Office.
- 5.6.** 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.
- 5.7.** A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer or member of staff at meetings held in public or before the press.

## **6. Website**

### **6.1. Aims**

- 6.1.1.** This section 6 of the policy relates to the management of the Parish Council's website.
- 6.1.2.** The aim is to set down guidelines to ensure proper and effective use of the website, which plays a critical role in providing timely information to the village about Parish Council business and other related matters.

### **6.2. Management**

- 6.2.1.** The website will be managed by the Clerk and up to three Councillors as determined from time to time by the Council. No other Councillors will have administration access to alter the website.
- 6.2.2.** The Clerk shall be responsible for uploading all documents and information (including meeting event notifications and notices) as are required by any applicable law to be published on the website.
- 6.2.3.** The Councillors referred to in 6.2.1 above shall be responsible for uploading as administrator all other posts, notices and content for the website pursuant to the aims in section 6.1 above.

- 6.2.4.** Any Councillor may suggest and generate content for the website. Content should be limited to matters concerning or of relevance to the Parish, with an emphasis on providing reliable factual information and commentary. It is good practice to include details of the author(s) of the particular post or notice, although it should be remembered that the website is a vehicle for communication by the Council as a whole and not individual Councillors.
- 6.2.5.** Purely factual content may be published to the website by the Councillors referred to in 6.2.1 without delay or further approval. Content that includes matters of opinion or potential controversy should, as a matter of best practice, be circulated to all Councillors prior to publication on the website so that a general consensus can be obtained and any reasonable comments taken into account before publication.

August 2023

**Policy Review Date: No later than August 2024**