

MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

1. Introduction

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity¹. The Code is statutory guidance and therefore councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

This Policy must be read and applied in conjunction with the Council's Communications Policy and Social Media Policy.

Failure to follow the Town Council's Policy on Media Communications could lead to a breach of the statutory Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Council's reputation. It is important that all Members and Officers who might come into contact with the media understand the implications of this Code which this policy explains within a local context.

Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to ensure that the messages put out by the Council are consistent and accurate. However, if communication is managed effectively, the Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

Honiton Town Council throughout the year

- receives enquiries from the media
- issues news releases
- organises photo opportunities
- arranges interviews
- produces its own newsletter within the local press

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Members involved in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest. It is further important to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be :

- open and honest
- proactive
- responsive and timely
- in line with the Council's Equalities policy
- in line with the adopted Code of Conduct

2. The Town Council's approach to publicity

The media plays a large role in informing residents about what the Council does and how it spends public money. It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible takes a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews so that:

- The Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and willing to listen
- There are opportunities to share and celebrate the Council's successes
- Information is provided about policies and services as well as the democratic process so that

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/56701878324.pdf

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- people feel more informed about the Council and its work
- Negative issues are handled clearly and decisively

The main media are the local and regional press together with local radio and television stations. It is unlikely that Honiton would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level but this policy is written to ensure that it is relevant to these cases should they occur. It is also recognised that the internet is the fastest growing area of the media and that many broadcasters and newspapers include information on Honiton and Honiton Town Council.

3. Identifying Newsworthy Items

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Clerk (as the Proper Officer) to make the decision as to whether or not a new release should be issued, having liaised with the relevant Members.

4. Handling Media Enquiries

The Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the Town Council office. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the Deputy Clerk or Mayor to respond to the enquiry.

Members of the Town Clerk's staff who are directly approached by the media should not respond to questions themselves without first establishing the full facts and should confer with the Clerk/Deputy Clerk before responding.

Members of the Council who are directly approached by the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this policy.

The Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. The phrase "no comment" should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

5. Press Releases and Letters or Emails to the Media

The use of press releases is a key technique for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.

There are two types of press releases :

(a) Council Press Releases

An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written and issued by the Clerk. Official Council releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Councillor or Committee. Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a Member's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official Council releases will be issued and published on the Council's website and social media within one working day of issue.

(b) Press Releases issued by Councillors

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Councillors should not issue press releases on behalf of the Council unless mandated by Full Council. Other press releases issued by councillors are personal and these types of releases may or may not be political and should not include the name of any Officer, use the Council logo or the Council telephone number as a point of contact. It must make clear that this is the personal views of the Councillor and not of the Town Council and the use of title Cllr or Councillor should not be used (See Appendix C 1.5). It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases, especially those of a factual nature, before issue to be provided to the Clerk for comments. Councillors seeking advice are advised to contact the Clerk.

6. Interviews

Any member of staff contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the matter to the Clerk, the Mayor or the appropriate committee Chairman. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist. Officers should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to legislation and corporate decisions and key messages, their role being to provide expertise and factual knowledge only in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.

7. Media Coverage of Meetings

Many stories relating to the Council will be picked up from agendas and reports in advance of meetings, all agendas being sent direct to local media and background papers being available on the Town Council website. All background papers carry the message "This report may contain the recommendations of an Officer or Member of the Council but these are subject to the final decision of the Town Council at its meeting".

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Council and committee meetings. During meetings Members should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what may be a complex issue.

8. Publicity during Elections

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself all proactive publicity about candidates and other politicians is halted. This applies to scheduled local, national or European elections. During this period Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required this may be provided by the relevant Officer, in accordance with national guidelines.

9. Non-Council Related Media

Officers and Members of the Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of organisations on which they are not a designated Council representative must not refer to their Council membership and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.

10. Managing Negative Issues

From time to time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Members and Officers must alert the Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract

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media interest is known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

Members and Officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

11. Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who is the most appropriate person to take the agreed action. Entering discussions or otherwise prolonging the communication should be avoided, which correcting inaccuracies can often lead to, and which should therefore be avoided.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain; each case should be judged individually.

Occasionally the Council may get something wrong. In these cases damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising and stating how the Council will learn from the error or put it right.

12. Town Council Newsletters

The Town Council has its own Annual report, which is published and made available free of charge throughout Honiton. It aims to promote council policies, services, activities and initiatives undertaken during the year and informs the Annual Parish meeting. The content is created in-house in consultation with appropriate Councillors (ie Chairman of Committees). Ideas for articles will be welcomed and should be passed directly to the Clerk.

13. Monitoring and Evaluation

The Council office will continually monitor the media coverage and will discuss any concerns with the Mayor and/or Chairman of the relevant committee.

14. Freedom of Information and Data Protection

Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act on a topic on which there is correspondence (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt (further information is available from the Council's Model Publication Scheme). The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure. In addition care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 1998 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

15. Internet Use

Internet use covers all websites, networking sites, forums and blogs which may be used by both Officers and Councillors. If they are used in an official capacity or on Council-related business, the guidance in this policy must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

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When acting in the capacity of Honiton Town Council, websites should not :

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or used for campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner

16. Use of Social Media

Reference should be made to the Council's Social Media Policy.