

EAST LEAKE PARISH COUNCIL

MEDIA RELATIONS PROTOCOL

Introduction

This is a protocol for East Leake Parish Council Employees and Councillors who may come into contact with the media. It covers procedures and protocols on:

- Media relations
- The writing and issuing of media releases
- Procedures for releasing information to the media
- Social Media and digital media

Our Strategic Aim

To recognise the value of the media in the Council's core value of communicating information to the public, and to use the media effectively to communicate with key audiences about Council services and priorities.

Our Policy Statement

East Leake Parish Council recognises the value of the media as a means of communicating information and messages to the public. The Council is committed to open government and a positive working relationship with media. We will be open, honest, and proactive in our dealings with them.

We appreciate that they have a job to do and respect the right of the media to report on any given topic. East Leake Parish Council values the media as one of its key partners in communication and will forge strong professional links with local, regional and national media.

The Role of the Parish Clerk

The Parish Clerk promotes and leads on all aspects of the Council's marketing, communications, and PR activities.

- **Working with the Media on behalf of the Parish Council**

The Council's media relations and media releases are managed by the Clerk.

Every media enquiry must be used as a positive opportunity to get our message across to the public.

These procedures will ensure dealing with the media is a well-managed experience for both the Council and the media. Providing one central point of contact for the media to

deal with is recognised as best practice. By operating in this way messages can be pre-arranged, and the media rarely catches a Council out, if innocently straying from the official line of the Council. Information is centralised and distributed in a clear, concise and corporate way.

- **Dealing with Media Enquiries**

Most media enquiries come directly to the Parish Clerk. It is the role of the Parish Clerk to deal with that enquiry and decide what is the best method of response. The response can sometimes be handled with a written statement but often a Council spokesperson is needed to speak to the media.

The Clerk will contact the relevant Councillor to decide the best method of response. It is imperative that Councillors respond swiftly to the Clerk's request to ensure a timely response to any media enquiry.

The media may contact the Clerk or Councillors directly. If the nature of the enquiry is straightforward, for example if the reporter is asking a question which only requires a factual answer, to ensure a swift response, the Clerk or Councillor should answer it there and then. The Clerk must be kept informed of any enquiries that Councillors consider may be of importance to the business of the Council.

However, if the enquiry is likely to be contentious, for example when the Council is being criticised, the Clerk or Councillor should take the details of the journalist, the full nature of the enquiry and pass this on to the Clerk who will liaise with the relevant Councillor in order to give the media an appropriate response.

- **Speaking to the Media on behalf of the Council**

East Leake Parish Councillors will be asked to speak to the media in relation to strategic decisions made by the Council or on high profile issues.

The Chairman, Deputy, or Committee Chairs will be called to speak on corporate and major issues that come under their remit and Council decisions. In addition, those Councillors who are at the time available – may be called upon.

All Councillors are encouraged to discuss any arranged media interviews, with the Clerk beforehand, and to prepare a written statement if possible.

Note: *Nothing in this protocol precludes Councillors or political groups from speaking or contacting the media (this would include letters, faxes and emails). **Councillors must, however, make it clear to the media whether they are speaking:***

- *Officially on behalf of East Leake Parish Council – in this case the Clerk should be kept informed; or*

- Officially on behalf of their particular political group (stating the name of that political group); or
- Personally, e.g., when talking more about global issues.

*** During elections, all publicity referring to a political party or anyone standing for election will be suspended between the publication of a notice of election and polling day.*

Councillors will not be quoted in media releases during this period unless it is a Councillor holding a key position commenting on an emergency or an important event outside of the Council's control and where there is a genuine need for a response by a Councillor.

Partnerships

Councillors involved in partnership organisations may be required to speak to the media on behalf of the partnership. This should be led by the partnership, but East Leake Parish Council's Clerk should be kept informed.

Use of Embargoes

Embargoes will only be used when considered essential:

- When news releases are linked to an event
- When an issue of confidentiality requires it; or
- When it is required by a third party

Note: Embargoes are not legally enforceable and are adhered to by a general local agreement.

Please inform the Clerk of any instances of an embargo being broken.

'No Comment'

Whilst we should avoid being 'unavailable for comment' there are some occasions where it is inappropriate to comment. For example, where legal action is pending, where an issue relates to the personal affairs of an individual or where there is a need to respect the privacy of a complainant, or someone being complained about.

Please advise the Clerk when deciding if a 'no comment' stance is the most appropriate.

Handling unusually Sensitive Issues

Occasionally a major incident or accident of a serious and or sensitive nature may occur. As soon as a Councillor becomes aware of an emerging issue, which may affect the Council's reputation, they must report it to the Clerk and the Chairman of the Council.

The facts of the case should be assembled and disseminated on a confidential basis to the key individuals identified and an official response agreed for active or reactive releases to the media. This may involve the drafting of a statement, a question-and-answer sheet, and/or giving media interviews.

The Clerk will be responsible for the monitoring of the communication of the issue and co-ordinating responses.

Bad News Stories

Our Policy is for mistakes to be acknowledged and apologised for 'on behalf of the Council' where appropriate and where we are able to do so. Any proactive statements, or answers to media questions such as these, should be discussed with the Chairman and Clerk.

Negative Media Coverage

There are occasions where the media coverage of a particular issue is negative. After discussion with the Chairman and the Clerk, contact should be made with media concerned to redress the balance.

Respecting Confidentiality

Occasionally issues come to the notice of the media that involve employees or Councillors and aspects of their private lives or employment contracts. It is not the Council's policy to comment upon such issues. Factual responses are permitted, for example – "I confirm that the employee is no longer employed by East Leake Parish Council, but I am not prepared to discuss the situation in any greater detail".

Employees and Councillors' responsibility to protect the Council's Reputation

Leaking of confidential information, exempt agenda items and minutes to the media – or public criticism of the Council or individual employees or associates – is viewed seriously by the Council.

If in doubt about how to raise concerns over which policy would be most appropriate for their needs, employees should seek advice and guidance from the Clerk.

Complaints about Media Coverage

Complaints about media reporting should be referred to the Chairman and Clerk to discuss appropriate action.

When a letter in the press requires a response, there should be a discussion between a Committee Chair and Clerk and suitable reply sent in the name of the Council, if thought appropriate.

Publicity Clearance Waiver/Press Complaints Commission Guidelines

The Press Complaints Commission Code of Conduct sets out various professional standards that the British press have a duty to maintain. The Code sets out the ethical benchmark for those standards.

In recent times it has become increasingly important to obtain prior permission to use a person's image in all communication material. This is increasingly sensitive when it comes to young people. The Rights Waiver form should be completed and returned to the Clerk.

The Press Complaints Commission Code of Conduct has two key areas of reference as best practice for Council communication:

- **Privacy**

- Everyone is entitled to respect for his or her private and family life, home, health and correspondence, including digital communications. Editors will be expected to justify intrusions into any individual's private life without consent.
- It is unacceptable to photograph individuals in private places without their consent.

Note: Private places are public or private property where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy.

- **Children**

- Young people should be free to complete their time at school without unnecessary intrusion.
- A child under 16 years old must not be interviewed or photographed on issues involving their own or another child's welfare unless a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult consents.
- Pupils must not be approached or photographed at school without the permission of the school authorities.
- Minors must not be paid for material involving children's welfare, nor parents or guardians for material about their children or wards, unless it is clearly in the child's interest.
- Editors must not use the fame, notoriety or position of a parent or guardian as sole justification for publishing details of a child's private life.

To ensure that Council Communication respects people's rights to privacy and the guidance for photographing children a Rights Waiver form has been developed that can be used when arranging media opportunities – to ensure that the people who appear in any subsequent Council media material have given their prior consent. The waiver form is available from the Clerk.

Press Briefings

Press briefings have three main purposes:

- To help explain a complex issue that will aid the media understanding of the subject and more accurate reporting
- To communicate an important story (good and bad news) that will attract media attention
- To 'launch' an initiative, service, or event

Councillors should liaise with the Clerk on the organisation of a press briefing, who should attend and what topics should be covered.

Note: Press briefings do not preclude the media from approaching other Council representatives to comment.

Media Launches

Media launches are a very effective way of publicising major new initiatives or events and to attract as much media interest as possible. If a media launch is being planned the Clerk should be brought into discussion at the earliest opportunity. The Clerk can then assist with ideas to attract the media, ensure that all the relevant employees and Councillors are fully involved and that any proposed launch date is suitable for both Council and the media.

Identifying and Preparing Information for the Media

- **Proactive Public Relations**

Positive media coverage comes from positive proactive media communications and the recognition of a good news story. It is essential that Councillors share all newsworthy issues (good and bad) with the Clerk.

- **Identifying Potential Stories**

To help the Council communicate and create a stronger identity with local residents it is vital that it takes every opportunity to communicate to them what it is doing especially good news stories. An excellent way of doing this is by issuing media releases.

Media Releases

The main purpose of a Council media release is to:

- Increase public awareness of services provided by the Council and the functions it performs.
- Explain to residents and Council Taxpayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities
- Improve local accountability
- Publicise forthcoming events
- **Who writes Media Releases?**

The Clerk is responsible for writing and issuing **all** East Leake Parish Council media releases, including media releases issued as a result of an official meeting of the Council. An official meeting of the Council is any meeting, which has been set up to discuss or carry out business of the Council.

Any Councillor who wishes to promote a new initiative or event via a media release **must** contact the Clerk who will issue a statement on behalf of East Leake Parish Council.

Employees are encouraged to draft a media release and forward it to the Clerk who will ensure that the release is approved by all relevant parties and is issued to the media. The Clerk may re-write any draft that comes to them to ensure it fits with any corporate style and suits the requirements of the media.

No East Leake Parish Council media releases should be issued to the media without liaising with the Clerk first.

Note to Councillors: Councillors and political groups may issue their own media release, but they must not use the Council's official media release template/headed paper and must clearly state that the views expressed are their personal views, or those of their political party.

It would be helpful if the Clerk is sent a copy of all media releases from Councillors and political groups as the media may contact the Clerk asking for a Council response.

- **Who should be quoted in Media Releases?**

Quotes are devices to make the media release more interesting to read and to back up the information in the media release.

In most cases the Chairman will be quoted to give the view from the Council. A Councillor or employee may be quoted to provide operational and background viewpoint or technical or legal clarification.

In some cases, it may be appropriate for just an employee or a Councillor to be quoted – and in a few instances where the media release is only aiming to provide a brief announcement or statement no quote is needed.

It is the Clerk's job to decide which is the most appropriate.

Contact Details on Media Releases

There must be contact details on the media release to enable the media to go to someone for more information. This should include anyone quoted in the media release; however, it is essential that the Councillor let the Clerk know if they are going to be available at the time of the issuing of the media release. All contacts must make themselves available to the media for the first point of contact and let the Clerk know when the media contacts them and the nature of the call.

Editorial for External Publications

The Clerk must see articles written by employees or Councillors that are destined to feature in external publications, if these articles relate to the Council or the work of the authority. This is to ensure that a consistent approach is taken towards the Council's corporate identity.

Any publications, both external and internal, that feature articles on East Leake Parish Council must be forwarded to the Clerk. This is because the media may pick up on these publications and may wish to follow up an article about the Council. If the Clerk has the publication, they can more easily help the media if they require assistance.

Social Media/Digital Media Policy

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to Parish Councillors, Council employees and others who seek to engage with the Council using online communications, collectively referred to as social media.

This policy should be read in association with how we use various media, including traditional printed press and broadcast TV and radio, to get our messages out to the public, as such one-way communication, in which we control the content – this also includes the Parish Council Website.

Social media is a collective term, and covers all forms of social media and social networking sites, in which there is interactive, two-way and multiple participant communication on the internet, such as (but not limited to):

- Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- Blogs and discussion forums

Although East Leake Parish Council may publish **‘outgoing’ information** on social media, in line with the media relations protocol, the Parish Office (i.e., Parish Councillors and Council employees, principally the Parish Clerk and Deputy), will not enter into exchanges with other users.

‘Incoming’ messages will only be responded to if received by email, in writing, by telephone, or in person. The sender of the message must be identifiable for response purposes, and respectful of the Parish Council.

Parish Councillors may themselves become the messenger by asking the Parish Clerk for a response to an issue raised on social media, which will be answered accordingly. This may also generate a formal outgoing message from the Parish Office.

The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration.

Individual Parish Councillors and Council employees are responsible for what they post in a Council and personal capacity. In the main, Councillors and employees have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

Social media may be used to:

- Advertise events and activities and dates of meetings.
- Good news stories linked to website or press page.
- Vacancies.
- Re-Tweet or share information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc.
- Announce new information.
- Post or Share information from other parish related community groups such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities.
- Refer resident queries to the clerk and all other councillors.

Code of Practice

When using social media (including email) Parish Councillors and employees must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and Council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

Councillors are advised to have two separate identities – one personal and the other as a Councillor, and not to mix postings.

Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

Parish Councillors and employees must not:

- hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- present personal opinions as that of the Council
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Council
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- use an individual's name unless given written permission to do so
- publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- post any information that infringes copyright of others
- post any information that may be deemed libel
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- bring the Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence

Publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action and fine for damages.

This also applies if someone else publishes something libellous on your social media site. A successful libel claim will result in an award of damages against you.

Posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence. Breach of copyright will result in an award of damages against you.

Publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation and is an offence.

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence.

Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the Council at a Council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Pre-determination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at Council meetings.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, employees or residents should report them to the Clerk of the Council.

Misuse of social media content that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

The Council has appointed the Communications Coordinator as the nominated person to act as moderator of official Parish Council social media output and be responsible for monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy. The Deputy Clerk is normally the person posting content onto social media.

The moderator will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from Council social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory or libellous nature.

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