



PRESS & SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

WRITTEN BY:

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Biddulph Town Council welcomes enquiries from the Press and Media and recognises that its relationship with the press helps communication with residents. The Council seeks to be as transparent as possible, cooperating at all times with the Press and using the opportunities of the media to publicise events being organised.

1.2 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.

In addition, this Policy provides guidance in relation to the Town Council's use of social media.

1.3 Councillors and Officers must observe Biddulph 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.

OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY

2.1 The aim of the policy is to ensure that Biddulph Town Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner and reflect, as far as possible, the corporate view of the Council.

The Council wishes to respond to the growth of social media channels and recognises that posts and comments made by Members of the Council could reflect directly on the organisation. This policy also sets out the required protocol for Members who communicate their thoughts and views through social media channels.

PROVISIONS

3.1 The Chief Officer 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.

All communications made by the Chief Officer will relate to the stated business and day-to-day management of the activities or adopted policy of the Council.

The Chief Officer is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council. Where such questions are put to the Chief Officer she should refer the enquirer to the appropriate committee for consideration.

No other officer of the Council, unless authorised by the Chief Officer, is permitted to speak or communicate with the Press and Media on any matter affecting the Council or its business.

3.2 Official Council Releases

- Official Council press releases and statements will be prepared by the Chief Officer in consultation with other Members as required;
- The Chief Officer will act as the Council's Press Officer. Any official contact with the media concerning the Council's policies, the decisions it makes and services it provides are to be initiated through the Chief Officer;
- Members who identify a media opportunity should discuss this with the Chief Officer who will, in consultation with other Members as appropriate, decide how this will be followed up;
- If a Member or an employee receives an approach or enquiry from the media about any matter relating to the Town Council, it should be referred to the Chief Officer.

- The Chief Officer, in consultation with the Town Mayor, is authorised to publish press releases on any urgent matters where there is insufficient time for a council meeting.

3.3 Councillor Press Releases

- A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Biddulph Town Council
- 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.
- Individual Councillors can make their own statements relating to local issues and this policy is not designed to prevent any Member expressing a personal opinion through the media. Members must make it clear however, that any view expressed which differs from Council Policy are their own personal views and should be recorded as such. 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;
- Such releases may or may not be political, should bear no reference whatsoever to the Council or any Officer and must not use the Council logo. Neither the Council address, telephone number nor website should be included as a point of contact. When speaking or providing written material to the Press and Media, Members should make clear the capacity, in which they are providing the information.
- Where a journalist wishes to confirm what was said by an individual councillor during a Council meeting, they will be referred to the Chief Officer.
- 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.
- Be cautious when using the prefix 'Councillor' when writing to the press as an individual, and always state if it is your personal opinion. A copy of any written material sent to the Press and Media by a Member, as representing the Council, must be forwarded to the Chief Officer.

3.4 Freedom of Information Requests

All requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act are to be referred to the Chief Officer who, in routine cases will arrange for the information request to be satisfied in accordance with the legislation. Please see the **Publication Scheme and Guidance** document for further information.

3.5 Management of Social Media

- Members should be aware of the Councils Code of Conduct and any legal implications if they are posting comments or views on social media about individual Members or Council employees or sharing information about the Council;
- Social Media should not be used as a platform to discuss Council Policy and Members who wish to challenge the Council's procedures must refer their concerns to the Chief Officer in the first instance;
- Members are not permitted to share the outcomes of closed working groups or fact finding sessions on social media;
- Defamation is the act of making a statement about a person or a company that is considered to harm reputation. If the defamatory statement is written (in print or online) it is known as libel.
- Social media accounts managed by Biddulph Town Council will be used to help keep local residents, businesses, interested parties and visitors to the Town informed of important Town Council related news, events and updates.
- The accounts will be managed by the Chief Officer on behalf of the Town Council who will seek to ensure that any legal obligations or best practice guidelines are adhered to; support will be provided with these activities by Officers of the Council.
- The Town Council may follow or subscribe to social media accounts from other users. This does not imply endorsement of any kind.
- Political posts will be removed and the Town Council will not engage on issues of party politics at any time.
- Inappropriate language or anything that might contravene libel, defamation, copyright or data protection laws will be removed.
- Online social media sites may occasionally be unavailable and the Town Council accepts no responsibility for lack of service.
- Feedback and ideas are welcomed from all sections of the community and the Town Council will endeavour to join the conversation where possible. However, it may not be possible to reply individually to all messages.
- Emerging themes or helpful suggestions will be passed to the relevant persons.

RELEVANT LEGISLATION

4.1 Guidance

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. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy:-

- “Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims [and the provision of services] should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both.”
- “Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council should be handled with particular care. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although councils should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments.”
- “Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.”

“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.”

4.2 Elections

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 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:-

- “Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the council (for example, Chairperson of a committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and personalisation of issues or personal images should be avoided.”
- “Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor which are relevant to their

position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward their justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals.”

- “The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.”

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.

4.3 Press

The Press are permitted to attend all meetings of the Council and its committees, unless excluded under the Public Bodies Admission to Meetings Act 1960. They are not, however, invited to attend any working group meetings which are informal fact finding sessions only and are not official council meetings.