

## **Arthuret Parish Council**

### **Media and Press Policy**

#### **General Statement of Policy**

This policy is to guide both Councillors and Officers on the Council in their relations with the news media in such a way to ensure the smooth running of the Council.

This policy does not seek to be comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some issues that may arise when dealing with news media organisations including press officers attending meetings.

The Council is accountable to the electorate for its actions and shall therefore be protective in making all reasonable efforts to make its decisions and policies known to the electorate.

Legal Framework - The policy is subject to the Councils statutory obligations set out in the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Councils Standing Orders, The Council must also have regard to the Governments Code of Recommended Practise on Local Authority Publicity.

#### **General principles for officers and members**

Officers and members should always have due regard for the long term reputation of the Council in their dealings with the media and should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Arthuret Parish Council.

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.

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 Councils solicitor before any response is made.

There are a number of personal private issues for Officers and Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively in accordance with the Councils policies on Freedom of Information and Data Protection. These issues include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Member contact details are in 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.

A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct of an Officer at meetings held in public or before the press.

### **Contact with the Media**

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 Councils Committees, the Chairman of the Council may delegate the authorised contact role to the Chairman of that Committee.

Statements made must reflect the Councils opinion.

Unless a Parish Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, Parish Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view. Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the right to act as an individual. This means the Councillors should be careful about expressing individual vies to the news, media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business.

Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made, while 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 news media.

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 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.

Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee. At all times consideration should be given as how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

### **Attendance of media at Council or Committee meetings**

Agendas and minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets together with dates of meetings being available on the Council website.

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request prior to the meeting.

The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

Any filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the parish Clerk and Chairman of the particular meeting.

### **Press releases**

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 Councils 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.

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. If there are time constraints on a Press release, agreement may be reached by circulating the release to members for approval by e-mail.

## **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 Chairman of a committee) and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors, proposals, decisions, and recommendations only where there is 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 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 a 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.

## **Notices**

The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Parish Clerk

## **Urgent situations**

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. If there are time constraints on a press release agreement may be reached by circulating the release to members for approval.

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.

1. The Vice Chairman of the Council may act in absence of the Chairman.
2. The Vice Chairman of a Committee may act in the absence of a Chairman.
3. The Parish Clerk may act in the absence of the vice Chairman of the Council or a Committee.

## **Parish Council correspondence**

The point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed.

The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.

No individual Parish Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council (or its committees or sub committees) (In particular Parish Councillors do not have the

right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate "a need to know".

All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Parish Council, using Council letter-headed paper.

Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to another person.

### **Parish Council correspondence with external parties**

The Clerk sends out the Councils correspondence and other bodies correspondence from individual Parish Councillors should be avoided; however, there may be exceptional situations where it is appropriate for a Parish Councillor to issue correspondence in his/her own name. Such correspondence must be authorised by the Parish Council and the correspondence must make it clear it has been written in an official capacity and has been authorised.