MIDDLETON STONEY PARISH COUNCIL

Media and Press Policy

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the media and who deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media. It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to deal with issues that may arise when dealing with the media.

KEY AIMS

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions, and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. All areas of communication 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 policies and priorities. It is important that the Press has access to the Clerk/Member 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 is properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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. The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

The Clerk and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

Confidential documents, 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 appropriate action taken.

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 Council's Solicitor before any response is made. There are several personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Member contact details may be in the 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 Clerk before any response is made to the media.

All formal requests for comment regarding policies on any matter should be directed to the Clerk in the first instance. If unavailable, the Chairman should be contacted.

When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or Chairman are authorised to contact the media. All responses to the Press should be drafted by the Clerk with the assistance of the Chairman.

Responses drafted on any matter may, however, be directed to another Councillor with the assistance of the Clerk for accuracy and lawfulness. In this instance, the Chairman should be made fully aware of the response and agree to its contents.
Statements made by the Chairman and the Clerk should reflect the formal Council's opinion if one has been established.

Other Councillors can communicate with the media but must ensure that the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council. Councillors are at liberty to communicate with the Press as parish representatives. However, they must always maintain that they speak as individuals and not on behalf of the Parish Council in line with Standing Order 22 and adherence to the Code of Conduct.

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. 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.

ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports, and minutes be sent to the media on request. The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available