



ILMINSTER TOWN COUNCIL
Media Policy
Approved 16 July 2024

1 Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the council for working with the media and 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, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with the media. Ilminster Town Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, to debate and consult on issues in the public arena.

2 Aims

2.1 Ilminster Town Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media – press, radio, TV, internet – 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 particular policies and priorities.

2.2 It is important that the press have access to officers and members 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 are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

3 Legal Framework

3.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988 and the Localism Act 2011. 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.”

3.2 In particular, Officers and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

3.3 Confidential documents, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the media. The content of letters and emails addressed to Ilminster Town Council and not marked as confidential will be treated as being in the public domain and their contents may be disclosed if the contents of such disclosures do not breach the privacy of others.

3.4 If representatives of news 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.

3.5 Officers and Members must not disclose any personal or confidential information about other officers or members. This includes the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number, disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. Members' details are available in the public domain and through their Members Interest declaration.

3.6 The Town Clerk is responsible for issuing formal press releases on behalf of the Ilminster Council to ensure that the principles outlined in the Legal Framework are adhered to, that there is consistency of style and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

3.7 Ensure that anyone giving permission to use an image is the original copyright owner and check the licensing agreement of photographs in any existing archives before use. Do not take or use any photographs of children who appear to be under the age of 18 without permission from a parent or guardian. Permission is non-transferable from a third party, such as a school.

4 Contact with News Media Organisations

4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Town Clerk is usually the main contact with permission to speak to the media. Except in the most straightforward cases, the caller should be informed that a statement will be made within 24 hours and they should be asked to set out clearly what they want to know. Statements made should reflect the Council's opinion.

4.2 Unexpected approaches from representatives of the media can lead to unguarded comments being made and great care must be therefore taken to avoid misrepresentation of the council's policy or its position on the matter in question.

4.3 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 submitted by the Town Clerk.

4.4 Members are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the press as a means of expressing their personal views. If they do they must make it clear that the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council or any of its Members. The same applies when talking to the media.

4.5 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may

affect the reputation of the Council. Ilminster Town Council's code of conduct includes a requirement upon members not to bring the Council into disrepute.

5 Attendance of news media representatives at Town Council meetings

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

5.2 Any filming or taping of Council proceedings by representatives of news media or private individuals must be with prior notice to the Clerk and Chairman of the meeting.

6 Elections

6.1 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 or Chairman 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 image making should be avoided."
- "Publicity should not be, or be liable to be misrepresented 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."

6.2 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 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.

7 News Releases

7.1 The purpose of a news release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's 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.

7.2. Any officer or member may draft a news release on behalf of Ilminster Town

Council, however they must all be issued by the Town Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.