

Press & Media Policy

Parish Clerk | Email: clerk@kepc.info

Policy for providing public access to meetings and for dealing with requests from the press/other media

1. Policy Statement

- a. This policy covers all individuals working at all levels within Kidmore End Parish Council, including all elected and co-opted councillors, the Clerk to the Council and all other employees and volunteers (collectively referred to as Staff in this policy).
- b. The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the Press or Media and when using social media.
- c. 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.
- d. Any Councillor or member of Staff failing to follow the guidelines set out in this policy may find themselves in breach of The Code of Conduct and subject to a complaint to the Monitoring Officer.

2. Council Meetings

All council meetings are open to the public and press. Councillors and the clerk should be aware that any statements made in meetings may be reported and that the public and media have a statutory right to record proceedings.

3. Key Aims

- a. The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions, and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. All mediums for communication are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations.
- b. It is important that the press have access to the Clerk 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.
- c. The Clerk has the authority to issue official Press releases, verbally or in writing, and is the designated owner of official council website and social media channels.

4. The Legal Framework

- a. All meetings are conducted according to the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014.
- b. The law governing communications by 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.
- c. The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should also be adhered to.

5. Filming, Voice Recordings and Photography at Council Meetings

- a. Although not required by law, if time allows permission should be obtained prior to the meeting. This will allow the Chair or Vice-Chair to arrange seating so that the person filming or recording:
 - Will not disrupt the meeting.
 - Will not film, record or take pictures of anyone young or vulnerable, or those who do not wish to be filmed, recorded, or have their pictures taken.
 - The right to refuse any of the above should be respected.
 - Can be made aware of any confidential item on the agenda that will be excluded from filming or being recorded as allowed by law to exclude members of the Press and the public.
- b. The Chair of the meeting will not withhold permission without good reason.
- c. If the Chair of the meeting considers that filming or voice recording or the taking of pictures is becoming intrusive or preventing those present to comment or join in the debate, the Chair will request that the activity should stop until such time as the intrusive nature has been resolved.
- d. If getting permission prior to the meeting is not possible then the person requiring the permission should arrive early so that they can speak to the Clerk and or Chair before the meeting starts. (This should be only in exceptional circumstances).
- e. The Council is not obliged to provide any filming or voice recording or camera equipment.
- f. These regulations will only apply to formal meetings where decisions are to take place; they will not apply to working groups or other informal meetings where decisions are not made.

6. Freedom of Information Requests

a. All requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act are to be referred to the Clerk, who, in routine cases will arrange for the information request to be satisfied in accordance with the legislation.

7. Press & Media

a. Communications with the Press and Media on behalf of the Council will be conducted by the Clerk who will have the authority to issue official Press releases, verbally or in writing.

b. Prior approval from full council, obtained either during a meeting or via email, will be sought on the content of Press releases or Media responses. Consensus from majority of councillors is required.

c. In the absence of the Clerk, the Chair or Vice-Chair will conduct any communications with the Press or Media and will follow the same procedures as the Clerk.

d. In an emergency, the Clerk, in consultation with the Chair or Vice-Chair, may issue either a written or verbal statement, without seeking consensus from majority of councillors.

e. An emergency for the purpose of this policy is defined as an unplanned major event impacting upon the Council's responsibilities where there is no time to convene a full council meeting or seek consensus before communicating with the Press or Media concerning the Council's position.

f. It will be the Council's normal position to avoid interviews with the Press and Media whether face to face or via a telephone interview. Where the Chair considers that it will not be in the best interest of the Council to decline a request for interview, then the Chair will act as spokesperson and consult with the Clerk and seek consensus of the majority of councillors on the approach to be taken prior to interview.

g. No Councillor shall communicate with the Press or Media on behalf of the Council without prior approval as per this policy.

h. Councillors should not use the prefix 'Councillor' when writing to the press as an individual. This implies you are stating Council policy, which is not necessarily consistent with your personal opinion.

i. An unexpected or unprecedented localised event may trigger an active interest, including direct contact, from the Press and other Media channels. If approached for comment directly, individual members of the Council must make clear when responding that they are doing so as an individual and NOT on behalf of the Council. Councillors should also be mindful of the policies and decisions of the Council, avoid speculation, and respect the integrity of fellow Councillors and the Clerk. The Clerk and the Chair must

be notified about any contact with the Press or Media as soon as possible and will report it immediately to South Oxfordshire District Council

j. Individual Councillors may make their own statements relating to local issues providing they

make it very clear, whether written or spoken, that it is a personal opinion being expressed, and in no way infer that it is that of the Council. If a Councillor chooses to express a personal view on a Council topic or issue that is contrary to that of the Council, then they should balance their comments by also stating the Council's position.

k. Themes or topics that a Councillor is considering writing articles on for the parish magazine and/or other local free issue magazines, that keep residents apprised of Council activities, will require prior approval from full council. Approval to be obtained either during a meeting or via email with a consensus required from the majority of councillors.

l. The press and public are permitted to attend all meetings of the Council and its Committees unless excluded under the Public Bodies Admission to Meetings Act 1960. Council reserves the right to exclude the public and Press from Working Group meetings or any other meetings which are not official Council meetings.

8. Social Media

a. Social media is a term commonly given to websites and online tools that allow users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge, and interests. The Council recognises that having an online presence is a good way to complement its traditional notice boards in disseminating information which is already in the public domain.

b. This policy covers all forms of online presence and includes (but is not limited to):

- Websites, specifically the Parish Council websites
- Facebook Pages/Groups and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Bloggs and discussion forums
- Email
- Press, The Media and Official Statement Releases
- Councillors' direct communication with Press
- Freedom of Information Requests

c. Councillors or staff posting to Council accounts must ensure:

- That the information has been approved for release by the Clerk or is already in the public domain. In the absence of the Clerk then approval is required from the Chair or Vice-Chair.
- If there is any question about posting information the advice of the Clerk must be sought
 - and their advice must be adhered to. When this is not possible, seek advice from the Chair
 - or Vice-Chair.
 - The individual making the post must make it clear whether they are doing so as an individual (who happens to be a Parish Councillor) as opposed to using “Councillor” as part of their name. This is important to avoid any risk of misleading the public on the Council’s policy or opinion on a given matter.
 - Posting should be clearly for the purpose of imparting information and care must be taken when stating an opinion, which must always be referenced as a personal opinion. Also refer to 7 above.

d. Council-originated posts should be generated from established Council accounts.

Appendix 1 for examples of suggested content.

a. This policy does not preclude Councillors from responding to posts on non-Council social media accounts. Councillors are actively encouraged to post where, for example, providing a timely correction to inaccurate, misleading or inflammatory information has the potential to defuse a volatile thread. Councillors would need to make it clear whether they were posting in a personal or Council capacity. Also refer to 7 above.

b. It is recommended that in the case of Facebook and similar sites, Councillors wishing to keep their personal life, and official capacities separate should create and use separate accounts.

c. Email is the predominant form of communication for Councillors and Staff. No problems generally arise from this form of communication, but it is important to bear in mind that, whilst it can be an informal means of communication, you should ensure that any Council emails maintain an appropriate level of formality and are not open to misinterpretation. It is recommended that Councillors and Staff consider using a standard email signature as this is a good way of providing the detail of who is sending the email and contact information.

d. Any account where the Councillor is identified as a Councillor, should make it clear in their account profile that the views posted are those of the Councillor in question and may not represent the views of the whole Council. Also refer to 7 above.

e. Councillors posting to social media accounts should not publish Council information, unless it is already readily available online or have permission to do so from the Clerk.

Privileged material gained from their position as a Councillor should not be used. If there is any question about posting information the advice of the Clerk, or in their absence Chair or Vice-Chair, must be sought and their advice must be adhered to.

f. Sharing of published/posted data from the established Council accounts is actively encouraged.

g. The Council has adopted a Code of Conduct for Councillors that is binding for all members. If you publish/post online in your official capacity as a Councillor or could appear to be acting in an official capacity, then you need to comply with the Code and be mindful of the seven Nolan principles applicable to holding public office (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership).

h. Failure to follow this policy could lead to a breach of the Code of Conduct and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Council's reputation.

i. In the main, Councillors and Council Staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

j. Sending, receiving, or being tagged in a message/post on social media will not be considered as having contacted the Council for official purposes. The Council is not obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through social media channels.

k. Whilst independent communications with parishioners are important as a way to engage and be approachable, the overarching rules are that Councillors should not make commitments on behalf of the Council, nor bring the Council into disrepute and always respect confidentiality.

l. The Clerk and nominated moderators will have authority, without notice or comment, to remove any posts which are deemed to be of an inflammatory, defamatory, political or libellous nature. Such posts may also be reported to the hosts (i.e. Facebook) and to the Clerk for council records. See Appendix 3.

m. The Clerk and nominated moderators will have authority to block or ban access from an individual or company's account to Council Social Media pages.

n. Council reserves the right to temporarily suspend any or all online presence, without notice, should a localised extraordinary event occur.

o. The Clerk and nominated moderators will ensure any security and privacy settings are set carefully and will ensure anti-virus and malware protection updates are maintained.

p. The Council will endeavour to not fall foul to phishing scams and will not agree to installing any external applications.

q. Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate the SCPC, Councillors, Council Staff or residents should report them to the Clerk and may result in action being taken.

Appendix 2

The Council may make use of approved online mediums to, for example:

- Distribute agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings
- Planning Applications
- Advertise events and activities
- Share good news stories
- Vacancies
- Share information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, etc.
- Announcing new information
- Upload images and videos
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction – prior consultation with full council with agreement from a majority of councillors required for discussion topic or question
- Post or share information from other parish related community groups such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities

Appendix 3

When participating in any online communication Councillors and staff must not:

- Hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- Page 6 of 6
- 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 permission to do so
- Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- Post any information that infringes copyright of others
- Posts must avoid a breach of GDPR
- 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
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Councils policies or personnel

- Post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
- Conduct of 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 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 online 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.

Appendix 4 - Moderation

The Clerk and nominated moderators will have authority to remove any comments or content, from council social media pages that they deem, for example:

- Obscene or racist content
- Defamatory, personal attacks, insults, bullying or threatening language
- Inflammatory
- Denigrates the SCPC, Councillors, council staff or residents
- Potentially libellous statements
- Plagiarized material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Anything of a political nature or deemed to be making a political point
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam