

Arlesey Town Council Press and Media Policy

1. Introduction

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

Arlesey Town Council recognises that interaction with the community is vital to its work and the decisions it takes. An open and constructive dialogue is a key requirement for influencing and developing services, identifying needs and measuring satisfaction. Conveying information accurately and effectively is an essential factor. The media & press 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 services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies, priorities and activity.

The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community holding the Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to Council Members and to background information to assist them in this role, 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.

This policy does not set out to be comprehensive but is to guide town Council members and anyone employed by the Council in their relations with the media.

The term media encompasses many different means of communicating information to a wide audience and whilst not exhaustive includes; Radio, Television, Internet, Social Media, Newspapers, Magazines, Leaflets, Posters and Local Publications.

2. Key Aims

- 2.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Arlesey Town Council for working with the press and media.
- 2.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech but to rather establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with the media.

3. The legal framework

- 3.1 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 possibly, 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 Specifically 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, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an Arlesey Town Council 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.
- 3.4 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.
- 3.5 There are numerous personal privacy issues for Staff and Council Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively in accordance with the Council's policies on Freedom of Information and Data Protection. These issues include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number, 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.

4 Contact with the Media

- 4.1 If a Councillor receives an approach or enquiry from the media about any matter relating to the Council this must be referred as speedily as practicable to the Chairman of the Council and the Clerk.
- 4.2 When responding to approaches from the media, the Chairman of the Council should normally be the authorised contact. However, if the subject of an enquiry relates to the work of one of the Council's Committees, this function may be delegated to a designated spokesperson of that Committee.
- 4.3 Statements made must reflect the Council's opinion.
- 4.4 Where Council Policy has not yet been decided on a matter this should be considered by the full council at the next scheduled meeting or, if of sufficient import, at an extraordinary meeting; before a formal reply is given.
- 4.5 **All Councillors may talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear the opinions given are their own and not necessarily those of the Council.**
- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Clerk following agreement by the Council. If individual Members choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Clerk. It should **always be made absolutely clear** whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.

- 4.8 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

5 Attendances of the Media at Council or Committee Meetings

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, prior to the meeting.
- 5.2 Recording of Council or Committee proceedings by the media is permitted in accordance with prevailing regulations.
- 5.3 Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 equips the public and press with statutory right to attend Parish Council meetings and meetings of Council Committees.

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 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 making 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 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 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.

7 Press releases and Public statements

- 7.1 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 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 press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk following agreement by the Council to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to, and that the use of the press release can be monitored to ensure that views expressed are consistent with Council opinion.

8 Notices

- 8.1 The Council website and social media pages will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Clerk/Assistant Clerk.
- 8.2 The Council will use wayside notice boards located throughout the village to maximum effect.