

Bridgnorth Town Council Working Group – Summary Document

TITLE: Media Policy Working Group

MEMBERS: Cllrs: Barlow, Round and Wellings

AUTHORITY: Town Council minute 0021/2122 dated 18th May 2021

BACKGROUND:

Standing Order 5j (xviii) requires a review of the Councils' Media policy. Currently no such policy exists. The Town Clerk prepared a draft policy for adoption at the meeting held on 18th May. The draft policy produced was modelled on the Society of Local Council Clerk's template.

REFERENCES / MEETINGS / DISCUSSION (an agreed commentary from the working group members that can summarise activity undertaken, evidence obtained to support or guide any recommendation that will be put before Council):

Meeting held on 15 June 2021

Present: Councillors S Barlow and I Wellings and R Williams

Councillor C Round was unable to attend due to a work commitment

IAW the terms of reference, Cllr Wellings was identified as being the Chair/leader and the draft policy was reviewed.

It was felt that a section should be contained within the policy that gave guidance on Councillors personal responsibility with regard to outside social media platforms when commenting on issues that affect the Council; its services, obligations and reputation

INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS (WG members agreed proposals):

- i) Accept the current policy (with typing errors corrected)
- ii) Add a section reflecting the above

Something along the lines of:

1. Councillors should refrain from entering into negative debate on social media platforms
2. If debates begin, Councillors should refer members of the public to the Town Council website or Facebook account where more information can be found. The contact details for the office can also be given.

OFFICER COMMENTS (for completion by officers to consider any unforeseen risks, compliance issues, overriding financial implications or wider business impact):

The Town Council policy cannot limit councillors rights and individuals to comment howsoever they wish. The Code of Conduct (<https://www.bridgnorthtowncouncil.gov.uk/council-information/policy-documents/>) identifies in very general terms the principles that councillors agree to. The Town Council has no powers to regulate councillor or public comment other than to take legal action however I believe a Town Council cannot be defamed.

Failure to challenge obvious misinformation or generate misinformation can be damaging to the reputation of the Town Council and mislead the general public so some encouragement for councillors to provide considered or corrective comment would seem to be helpful. The proposed additional comments appear to be reasonable additions and I have added them to a new final paragraph of the draft policy under the heading Councillors Responsibilities.

If you are looking to regulate people's comments (with some form of policing of it) on social media then I fear that the task might be beyond us. The Policy was written as a Media Policy to articulate how the Council might engage in an agreed manner so that there might be some relative consistency. The policy references Facebook as Facebook is one of the medias that we use to convey corporate messages.

I would recommend that you review the revised draft, modify if necessary paragraph 10 and when you are satisfied please return the form to me for inclusion at the next available Town Council for consideration.

REVIEW BY WG MEMBERS (final considerations of the WG members before making a final recommendation to Council):

Councillors Wellings and Barlow content with revised draft (to include a new paragraph at the end of the document regarding councillor responsibilities). No comment from Councillor Round.

RECOMMENDATION(S) FOR FULL TOWN COUNCIL (the likely wording that will appear on the agenda):

It is recommended that the Town Council RESOLVES to adopt the revised Media Policy as amended by the Media Policy Working Group and now that the function is complete that the Working Group be disbanded.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS (other documents that might be of benefit to the Full Council)

Revised draft Media Policy enclosed.

Ian Wellings
Councillor
For Media Policy Working Group



Bridgnorth Town Council

Press and Media Policy

Adopted: Town Council Minute ????? dated xxxx

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. 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.
- 1.2. 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.

2. KEYS AIMS

- 2.1. The 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 the Clerk/ 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. 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 governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
- 3.2. The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

4. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

- 4.1. The Clerk (or other officers) and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.
- 4.2. 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 appropriate action taken.
- 4.3. 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. Whenever possible any information given to the press shall be given in writing so as not to leave interpretation open to misunderstanding and misreporting.
- 4.4. There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Officers 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 are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision.

- 4.5. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.
- 4.6. When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or the Chairman are authorised to contact the media.
- 4.7. Statements made by the Chairman and the Clerk (or other Officers) should reflect the Council's opinion.
- 4.8. Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council.
- 4.9. 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.

5. ATTENDANCES OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

- 5.1. The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.
- 5.2. The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.
- 5.3. Any filming or taping of Council proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Clerk and Chairman of the meeting (see Standing Orders).

6. PRESS RELEASES

- 6.1. 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 the Clerk and Members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- 6.2. The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the 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.

7. FACEBOOK

Aims

- 7.1. This policy relates to the creation and management of a Facebook Page by the Town Council.
- 7.2. An aim of this policy is to set down rules and regulations to ensure proper use of the page.
- 7.3. An aim is to use the Facebook page to interact in a stronger way with the townsfolk, advertising events and other projects of the Town Council or activities that might have a significant impact on residents and the Town. It is not intended that the Facebook page will be used to respond directly to individual queries on services, policy, complaints, or lead into an exchange of general correspondence. The appropriate method of contacting the Council for the raising of queries about its services or will be via email, telephone, or letter in order that the query can be addressed by the appropriate officer of the Council in a considered manner and responses can be filed for future reference.
- 7.4. An aim is for a cordial and polite sharing of useful public information regarding Town Council activities.

8. General Operation.

- 8.1. The page will be managed solely by appropriate officers of the Town Council. No Councillors will have access to the page for administration purposes.
- 8.2. Only information regarding the Town Council should be entered as part of the Biography.
- 8.3. The account should only link to pages of a local government organisation or organisations/causes relating to the Town.
- 8.4. No religious or political views should be expressed under the biography.
- 8.5. Friends will not be allowed to post new topics to the wall – This will prevent others placing topics on games etc. to the Town Council's account for all to see. However, friends would be able to comment on wall topics created by the Town Council.
- 8.6. Posts on the page would be available for all uses of Facebook to see.
- 8.7. The logo will be the profile picture for everyone to see.
- 8.8. Photo Albums will be open for everyone to view.

9. Oversight

9.1. The page will be maintained by the appropriate officers (as delegated to by the Clerk) who will remove messages from the wall which include:

- Abusive language content
- Which may cause offence to a specific group of people eg comments on a person's sexuality, sexist comments, racial comments etc.
- Which contain potentially libellous comments.

9.2. People would be encouraged to be friends of the Town Council.

9.3. If friends are repeatedly abusing the Town Council's wall, then they will be removed from the friends list and unable to post to the wall. Instances which would involve removal from the friends list include repeated:

9.4. Posting with abusive language content

9.5. Posting comments which may cause offence to a specific group of people e.g. comments of a person's sexuality, sexist comments, racial comments etc Posting potential libellous comments

9.6. Private messages will only be sent in response to anyone sending an initial private message to the Parish Council account. The response will ask the person to email the Council with the request for comment and the office email will be provided.

10. Councillor Responsibilities.

10.1 Councillors should refrain from entering into negative debate on social media platforms.

10.2 If debates begin, Councillors should refer members of the public to the Town Council website or Facebook account where more information can be found. The contact details for the office can also be given.

Reviews and Changes

This policy will be a living document and will be able to be altered by the Clerk to allow immediate but temporary action should the unexpected arise. This will be key to overcoming issues that might have not already been identified.

This Policy will be reviewed from time to time by the Council as appropriate and at least once in the term of the Council.

Immediate changes required to the policy will be notified at the next Council meeting to keep Members abreast of any changes outside of a formal review.