

Engagement & Media Policy

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to set out how the council and its representatives will engage with its stakeholders and define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for working with the media. 'Stakeholders' include all residents of the parish, parish employees, Cornwall Council Members and employees and other elected representatives.

2.0 Keys aims

2.1 The Council is accountable to the parish community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective engagement and two-way communications. The media (press, radio, TV, internet) and face to face activities – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive 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.

Example: the council can publish newsletters or flyers to highlight topical issues.

2.2 The parish council is the key organisation here: it has both the power and means to impact on peoples' lives and wellbeing, and so has the greater responsibility to reach out to all parts of every community and encourage active participation in its work.

Example: Clerk and councillors should anticipate issues that may be of concern to its communities and proactively reach out to encourage engagement.

2.3 It is important that both residents and the media have access to the Clerk 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 whatever channels of communication if necessary.

Example: Parish Clerk will monitor local media and other public sources of information for references to the council that may impact on its reputation or the wellbeing of its residents.

3.0 Engagement

3.1 Residents are precept tax payers, and have every right to hold councillors and paid employees of the council to account. This council will proactively identify opportunities to inform residents about its work by encouraging them to: attend and participate in council meetings; to volunteer for projects in the parish that the council may fund; to stand for public office at council elections.

Example: this council publishes a guide to Attending Council Meetings which is given to every person making a planning application; planning applicants are invited to attend council meetings when their proposal is being considered; the grants and donations system encourages joint working with the council; councillors are encouraged to nominate residents when co-opting for vacancies.

3.2 Engagement with residents is not restricted to the formal attendance at public meetings. Councillors should identify opportunities where they can attend meetings and other events in order to promote understanding about the work of the council.

Example: Councillors sit on community committees; write articles for the parish magazine; take on casework for residents; make site visits for planning applications; staff stands at community events such as the annual Cherry Fayre.

3.3 Increasingly, parish councils are being asked to consider joint working arrangements with other councils and voluntary groups. Where appropriate, it should actively seek to engage with adjacent councils to promote understanding of its own policies and actions.
Example: this council has worked with Liskeard Town Council and contributed funding for a joint needs assessment for employment land at Bolitho Farm.

3.4 In discharging its responsibilities, councillors are also aware of the need to engage productively with other parishes within the ward, the ward councillor, its Member of Parliament and Member of the European Parliament.
Example: the chair attends quarterly Community Network Area forums to take advantage of the opportunity to meet other council chairs.

4.0 The legal framework

4.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988, and the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities (2014). The Council must also have regard to the governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

5.0 Contact with the media

5.1 The Clerk and Members will always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media. (2.3 above)

5.2 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence must not be shared with the media. Members Code of Conduct, FOI policy and other Data Protection Policies set out the boundaries for sharing information. However, the default position is one of openness and transparency.
Example: prior to its public meetings, this council publishes all reports that members receive to support their decision making so that residents have access to the same information.

5.3 When the media or any other stakeholder wish to discuss an issue that may be subject to legal proceedings then advice will be taken from the Council's solicitor, the Cornwall Association of Local Councils or any other professional person before any response is made. This advice will be sourced and presented by the Clerk acting on instructions from the council.

Example: with complex or controversial planning applications, the council may wish to take prior advice from a planning officer, planning consultant or a solicitor.

5.4 There are a number of 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 are in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision.

Example: the council's General Privacy Notice sets out what personal and sensitive information is held by the council and how it is managed. Residents can be reassured that any personal data is strictly managed.

5.5 When responding to approaches from the media, the Chair, Vice Chair and Clerk are authorised to make contact with the media.

Examples: when publicising parish council events or reactions to topical issues, the Clerk will advise the Chair before responding. Clerk will also facilitate any statements or meetings.

5.6 Statements made by the Chair, Vice Chair and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion.

5.7 Other Councillors can use a range of media platform but must ensure that it is clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council.

Example: councillors who have personal social media accounts must be clear in their 'About' section that they speak as residents and not to represent the council.

6.0 Attendance of media at council meetings

6.1 The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

6.2 Any filming or taping of Council proceedings by the media must comply with Section 4 of the council's Standing Orders.

7.0 Managing the council's media

7.1 The parish council has direct control over a range of media that it should use to their fullest extent. Any information presented here must be accurate, timely, sourced and with an opportunity for readers to feedback.

Example: the parish noticeboard; signatures on emails; printed leaflets and posters; social media accounts; signage on council managed assets.

7.2 Individual councillors and employees are the most visible face of the council and present opportunities for one-to-one engagement. Councillors are reminded that when acting in their elected role, they are bound by their Code of Conduct and the various GDPR policies that have been adopted.

Example: when taking on casework or receiving comments/complaints, information can be shared with other agencies when consent has been given. Reporting back at the public meeting (anonymised when required) is a simple way of demonstrating the council's work in action and will encourage greater engagement.

7.3 The council frequently make surveys among residents to gauge public opinion on matters prior to making decisions. It is important that those taking part in any survey have the opportunity to make comments ('free text' if online) and that their comments receive a response. This means that every survey undertaken is available in the public domain and stakeholders are kept informed.

Example: the council has made several surveys among its allotment holders to guide its policies on allocation and provision of new facilities. All plot holders have received individual invitations to take part in the survey and have been sent complete copies of the survey results.

8.0 Hard to hear groups

8.1 Not all residents are aware what the function of this parish council is. This may be through personal choice, lack of understanding or not having the opportunity to find out. We cannot rely on parish noticeboards or social media alone to reach these people. Although 85% of residents live in the centre of the parish, there are four other settlements (Pengover Green, Merrymeet, Clicker, Island Shop) which may feel disconnected from parish and civic life. Similarly, there are discrete communities of interest who feel the same disconnect. The council should be proactive in identifying individuals or groups of people who should be given the opportunity and the means to engage with the council when the need arises.

Example: during the recent governance review, councillors visited residents in their own homes to explain the council's position and to deliver a printed newsletter.

9.0 News releases

9.1 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.

9.2 The Clerk or any Member may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk so that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

Adopted: 19 September 2019
Review@ 2022