

## **COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA POLICY – Proposed amendment of Standing orders - DRAFT V1**

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**Adopted: xx/xx/xxxx**

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### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Fen Ditton Parish Council (known as “the Council”) for working with the press and media (known as “the media”) and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media. This includes publication of all Web Site documents, e-Newsletters etc. This policy also includes communication with the Fen Ditton community. The term Publication includes information on the Councils web site which is the main form of communication (being fastest, cheapest and has most capacity) with our community with the exception of the requirement to post certain information the village notice board. The web site will be supplemented with a newsletter highlighting the main issues of the day.

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 and disseminating information by all the means available. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

It is recommended that this policy be published “for comment” on the councils web site for a period of not less than one month prior to being adopted.

### **2 KEYS AIMS**

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The internet Web Site, 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 the services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities. It is the aim on the Council to use the Web Site as its main form of communications with the press and the Fen Ditton community except where legislation requires use of the village notice board.

The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the Council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to Officers and Councillors 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.

### **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.” all current policies and proposed policies will be published on the council web site and kept up to date.
- “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.”

3.2 “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.”

In particular, Officers and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media and the contents of the Councils Web Site.

3.3 Confidential documents and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media or published on the Web Site. If such leaks do occur, an 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 Agendas, minutes of meetings, reports etc. will be published on the Councils Web Site in a timely manner. Agendas will be posted before meetings in addition to the village notice board. All minutes, reports etc. will remain on the web site indefinitely as an archive.

3.5 When the media or other party 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.

3.6 There are a number of personal privacy issues for Officers and Councillors 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 (although Councillor contact details are in the public domain), disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Parish Clerk before any response is made to the media.

#### **4.0 CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA and WEB SITE PUBLICATIONS**

When responding to approaches from the media, the Chairman of the Council should be the authorised contact with the media in consultation with the Parish Clerk. However, if the subject of an enquiry relates to the work of one of the Council’s Committees, the Chairman of the Council may delegate the authorised contact role to the Chairman of that Committee.

Statements made must reflect the Council’s opinion and policy.

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. This also applies to any Web Site Blogs.

Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers or on the Web Site. 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 issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee. If individual Councillors choose to send letters to

express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Parish Clerk. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Councillor.

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

## **5 ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

Agendas and minutes of meetings will be supplied to media outlets together with dates of meetings via the Council's website. A link being provided in response to any email requests.

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, 3 days prior to the meeting.

The media are welcome to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

Any filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Parish Clerk and Chairman of the particular meeting.

To assist councillors accessing documents etc. during the meetings WiFi internet access will be available at the Recreation ground building. This Internet connection may be made available to other groups that hire the ground on the understanding that it is unblocked, they must police its use themselves and ensure they have adequate security on their computers.

The Internet connection may also be used to provide connections to any security devices or systems installed at the Rec. ground or buildings.

## **6 ELECTIONS**

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, including the web site, 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 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 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, Councillors holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

## **7 PRESS RELEASES**

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 Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

7.2 Any Officer or Councillor may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Parish Clerk following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee 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.

7.3 The Clerk or Chairman will make their best efforts to give advanced notice to the media of any forthcoming meetings that have items on the agenda of special interest to the local community. This includes guest speakers, significant proposals or planning applications. The notice will be issued in time to meet any media deadlines for publication to enable the item to be published in advance of the meeting.

## **8 NOTICES**

The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by the Parish Clerk or nominated councillors.

The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of agendas, minutes and other council information.

## **9 URGENT SITUATIONS**

In the case of an urgent letter or press release being required in advance of a Council or Committee meeting, this may be issued by the Parish Clerk with the agreement of the Chairman of the Council or relevant Committee following circulation of a draft version to other Councillors for comment.

In the case of urgent actions being required in the absence of the Councillors and Officers with specific roles and responsibilities under this policy, the following delegations shall apply:

a) the Vice Chairman of the Council may act in the absence of the Chairman; b) the Vice Chairman of a Committee may act in the absence of the Chairman; c) the Parish Clerk may act in the absence of the Vice Chairman of the Council or a Committee.

## **10 EMAIL AND WEBSITE**

1. Each councillor will be allocated their own email address from the Fen Ditton domain. The Chairman and parish Clerk will use an email address that reflects their function e.g. [chairman@fenditton.org.uk](mailto:chairman@fenditton.org.uk) allowing ease of switching during extended periods of absence or change in personnel. An alias email linked to these job functions to the individual may be issued if required.
2. All email communications relating to the business of the parish must be sent using the councils official email domain accounts.

3. Email accounts and their contents remain the property of the council.
4. Council emails must only be used for council business and may be subject to inspection by other council members or other authorities at any time.
5. Great care must be used posting any information onto the council web site.

## **11 FAQ's**

In an effort to reduce the workload of the parish clerk a set of Frequently Asked Questions will be maintained on the council web site. These will be added to as more questions arise.

## **12 NEWSLETTER**

The council regular newsletter will be published on the web site and a printed version will be printed and available on request for those that do not have internet access. The printed newsletter will be delivered by volunteers when they are available but delivery is not guaranteed.

## **13 UNPUBLISHED INFORMATION**

Only when it is necessary the parish council will not publish information as specified in the Local Government Act 1972. However, some information is not suitable for entry into the public domain for example where there is an obligation of confidence, employee matters or commercial quotes:

*Under Section 100(A) (4) Local Government Act 1972, the following minutes are excluded from publication on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.*

*See <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1972/70/section/100A> for full details.*