

UPTON & NORTH ELMSALL PARISH COUNCIL

PRESS AND MEDIA PROTOCOL

1. Purpose

This Protocol sets out how Upton and North Elmsall Parish Council will deal with enquiries from the press and media.

It is intended to support clear, accurate and consistent communication with newspapers, radio, television, online news outlets, journalists, reporters and other media representatives.

This Protocol supplements the Council's adopted Social Media & Communications Policy, which sets out the Council's wider approach to official communications, social media, website content, councillor and staff online conduct, misinformation and moderation. That policy already confirms that the Clerk is responsible for publishing official Council information and ensuring that content is accurate, appropriate and lawful.

This Protocol replaces the Council's previous Press and Media Policy, adopted on 21 November 2016.

2. General Principles

The Council recognises the important role of the press and media in reporting matters of public interest and supporting local democracy.

The Council will seek to respond to media enquiries in a timely, fair and professional manner.

Any statement issued on behalf of the Council must be accurate, lawful, balanced and consistent with the Council's agreed corporate position.

The Council will not use the press or media to debate personal disputes, make personal comments about individuals, or respond in a way which may bring the Council into disrepute.

The Council will not normally comment on matters which are confidential, legally privileged, commercially sensitive, relate to individual employees, or are otherwise inappropriate for public discussion.

3. Official Press Contact

3.1 The Parish Clerk is the Council's official press and media contact.

3.2 All press and media enquiries relating to Council business should be referred to the Clerk.

3.3 No Councillor, employee, volunteer or other person acting on behalf of the Council may issue a statement to the press or media on behalf of the Council unless authorised to do so.

3.4 The Chair of Council may provide comment on behalf of the Council where authorised, but any such comment must reflect the Council's agreed position and not a personal view.

3.5 Where a matter relates to the work of a Committee, the Clerk may consult the Chair of that Committee before issuing a response.

- 3.6 Where a matter is urgent, sensitive, reputationally significant or has not previously been considered by the Council, the Clerk may consult the Chair, Vice-Chair, relevant Committee Chair, legal advisers, insurers or Full Council before issuing any response.

4. Media Enquiries

- 4.1 Any Councillor, employee or volunteer who receives a press or media enquiry relating to Council business must refer the enquiry to the Clerk as soon as possible.
- 4.2 Where an enquiry is received verbally, the person receiving it should avoid making immediate comment and should ask the journalist or media representative to submit the enquiry in writing wherever possible.
- 4.3 The following wording may be used:
“Thank you for your enquiry. I am unable to comment on behalf of the Council, but I will pass your request to the Parish Clerk, who is the Council’s official press contact.”
- 4.4 The Clerk will consider the enquiry and decide whether:
- a factual response can be provided;
 - a formal statement is required;
 - further information is needed;
 - legal, insurance or specialist advice should be obtained;
 - the matter should be referred to the Chair, Vice-Chair, relevant Committee or Full Council;
 - no comment should be made.
- 4.5 Where the Council has not yet considered or resolved a matter, this should be made clear. The Council should not be drawn into speculation.
- 4.6 Where appropriate, the Council may decline to comment.

5. Press Releases and Official Statements

- 5.1 Press releases and official statements may be issued to inform the public about Council decisions, services, projects, events, consultations, public notices or other matters of local importance.
- 5.2 Press releases and official statements will normally be prepared by the Clerk.
- 5.3 Where appropriate, the Clerk may consult the Chair, Vice-Chair or relevant Committee Chair before issuing a press release or statement.
- 5.4 Press releases and statements must be restricted to matters which are factual, accurate and within the Council’s powers, responsibilities or agreed decisions.
- 5.5 Press releases and statements must not present the personal views of individual Councillors or employees as Council policy.
- 5.6 A copy of all press releases, statements and significant media correspondence must be retained in accordance with the Council’s document retention arrangements.

6. Councillors' Personal Comments to the Press

- 6.1 Councillors may express personal views to the press or media, provided they comply with the Council's Code of Conduct and do not misrepresent the Council's position.
- 6.2 Where a Councillor is expressing a personal view, they must make it clear that they are speaking personally and not on behalf of the Council.
- 6.3 Councillors should not use the title "Councillor" in a way which suggests that a personal view is an official Council statement.
- 6.4 Councillors must not disclose confidential information, personal data, exempt information, legal advice, commercially sensitive information, or information discussed in private session.
- 6.5 Councillors should not seek to undermine Council decisions through the press or media. Councillors may explain that they disagreed with a decision, where that information is already in the public domain, but should respect the lawful decisions of the Council once made.
- 6.6 Where there is any uncertainty, Councillors should seek advice from the Clerk before responding to the press or media.

7. Employees and Volunteers

- 7.1 Employees and volunteers must not speak to the press or media on behalf of the Council unless authorised to do so.
- 7.2 Employees and volunteers must refer all media enquiries to the Clerk.
- 7.3 Employees and volunteers must not disclose confidential information, personal data, internal documents, correspondence, legal advice, commercially sensitive information or any information obtained through their role unless authorised and lawful.
- 7.4 Matters relating to employee conduct, capability, grievance, disciplinary procedures, sickness absence, pay or employment terms must not be discussed with the press or media.

8. Confidential, Private and Sensitive Matters

- 8.1 The Council will not normally comment on matters which are confidential, exempt from publication, legally privileged, commercially sensitive, or being considered in private session.
- 8.2 Where a press or media enquiry relates to a confidential matter, the Council may confirm only what is already lawfully in the public domain.
- 8.3 Councillors and employees must not disclose details of confidential reports, private meeting discussions, legal advice, staffing matters, contractual negotiations or commercially sensitive information.
- 8.4 Breaches of confidentiality may be treated as a breach of the Code of Conduct, a disciplinary matter, or both, depending on the circumstances.

9. Interviews, Broadcasts and Recorded Comments

- 9.1 No Councillor, employee or volunteer should take part in a press, radio, television, podcast, online or recorded interview on behalf of the Council unless authorised to do so.
- 9.2 Where an interview is authorised, the person giving the interview must keep to the agreed Council position.
- 9.3 Where possible, the Clerk should be informed of the proposed questions or topic in advance.
- 9.4 A record should be kept of any significant interview or broadcast given on behalf of the Council. Where a recording is not available, a written note of the key points should be retained.

10. Requests for Council Documents or Information

- 10.1 Requests from journalists for agendas, minutes, reports or other documents should be handled in the same way as requests from members of the public.
- 10.2 Public documents may be provided or signposted where they are already available on the Council's website.
- 10.3 Requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act, Environmental Information Regulations, UK GDPR or Data Protection Act must be handled under the Council's usual information rights procedures.
- 10.4 The fact that a request has been made by a journalist does not alter the Council's legal duties when handling information requests.

11. Corrections and Inaccurate Reporting

- 11.1 Where the Council believes that information published by the press or media is inaccurate, misleading or damaging, the Clerk may seek a correction, clarification or right of reply.
- 11.2 The Clerk may consult the Chair, Vice-Chair, relevant Committee Chair, insurers or legal advisers before responding to inaccurate or damaging reporting.
- 11.3 The Council will normally seek to resolve concerns politely and proportionately.
- 11.4 Where appropriate, complaints about press or media conduct may be referred to the relevant publisher, platform, regulator or professional body.

12. Crisis or Emergency Communications

- 12.1 In the event of an emergency, serious incident, reputational issue, health and safety matter, legal issue or matter involving significant public concern, press and media responses will be coordinated by the Clerk.
- 12.2 The Clerk may consult the Chair, Vice-Chair, relevant Committee Chair, insurers, legal advisers, emergency services, principal authority or other relevant bodies before issuing a statement.

12.3 In urgent situations, the Clerk may issue a brief holding statement, such as:

“The Council is aware of the matter and is currently reviewing the position. A further update will be provided when appropriate.”

12.4 No Councillor, employee or volunteer should make public comment on a crisis or emergency matter unless authorised to do so.

13. Record Keeping

13.1 The Clerk will retain records of significant press and media enquiries, responses, press releases, statements, corrections and related correspondence.

13.2 Records will be retained in accordance with the Council’s Data Retention and Disposal Policy.

13.3 Where a press or media response is given verbally, the Clerk should keep a written note of the key points discussed.

14. Breaches of this Protocol

14.1 Breaches of this Protocol by Councillors may be referred for consideration under the Code of Conduct.

14.2 Breaches by employees may be dealt with under the Council’s employment policies and procedures.

14.3 Breaches by volunteers or other authorised representatives may result in the withdrawal of permission to act on behalf of the Council.

14.4 Serious breaches may also require notification to insurers, legal advisers, the Information Commissioner’s Office or other relevant bodies, depending on the circumstances.

15. Review

15.1 This Protocol will be reviewed periodically, or sooner if required by changes in legislation, guidance, Council procedures or operational need.

15.2 This Protocol should be reviewed alongside the Council’s Social Media & Communications Policy to ensure the Council’s wider communication arrangements remain consistent.