

Otterhampton Parish Council



Press & Media Policy

Adopted by Council: Otterhampton Parish Council

Minute reference: 54.26

Review date: Annually, or sooner if legislation, guidance or council practice changes

Policy owner: Clerk/RFO

Applies to: Councillors, employees, volunteers and anyone authorised to speak on behalf of the Council

1. Purpose

This policy sets out how Otterhampton Parish Council will communicate with the press, media and other public information channels in a clear, accurate, lawful and consistent way. It is intended to:

- protect the reputation and impartiality of the Council.
- ensure residents receive accurate information.
- make clear who may speak on behalf of the Council.
- support openness and transparency.
- prevent the unauthorised disclosure of confidential or personal information.
- ensure press and media enquiries are handled promptly and professionally.

2. Scope

For the purposes of this policy, “press and media” includes:

- newspapers, magazines and newsletters.
- radio and television.
- online news sites and blogs.
- social media platforms.
- podcasts and livestreams.
- photographers, videographers and other content creators.
- any person or organisation reporting on Council business.

This policy covers:

- press enquiries.
- press releases.
- public statements.
- media interviews.
- photography, filming and recording at Council meetings or events.
- comments made on behalf of the Council.
- use of social media where it relates to Council business.

3. General Principles

The Council’s communications will be:

1. **Accurate** — based on agreed facts, Council resolutions or published information.
2. **Lawful** — compliant with relevant legislation and statutory guidance.
3. **Impartial** — not party political and not used to promote individual councillors.
4. **Respectful** — consistent with the Council’s Code of Conduct.
5. **Transparent** — open wherever possible, while protecting confidential and personal information.
6. **Proportionate** — appropriate to a parish council’s role, resources and responsibilities.

Councillors must continue to comply with the Council's Code of Conduct, including the requirement to act lawfully, treat others with respect, and maintain public confidence in local government. The Code also states that councillors should express disagreement robustly but civilly, and should not subject individuals, groups or organisations to personal attack.

4. Who may speak on behalf of the Council

Only the following may speak or issue statements on behalf of Otterhampton Parish Council:

- the **Chairman**, where authorised or where the matter is clearly within an agreed Council position.
- the **Clerk/RFO**, as Proper Officer, for administrative, factual or procedural matters.
- another councillor or representative where expressly authorised by Council resolution.

No councillor, employee or volunteer may claim to speak on behalf of the Council unless authorised to do so.

Individual councillors may speak to the media in a personal capacity but must make clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the Council unless authorised.

Suggested wording:

"I am speaking in a personal capacity and not on behalf of Otterhampton Parish Council."

5. Media enquiries

All requests from the press or media for a comment, interview, statement or background information must be referred to the Clerk/RFO as soon as possible.

The Clerk/RFO will:

- record the enquiry.
- establish the deadline and nature of the request.
- check whether the matter relates to an agreed Council position.
- consult the Chairman where appropriate.
- prepare or coordinate a response.
- ensure any response is factual, proportionate and authorised.

Where the issue is sensitive, controversial, confidential, legal, employment-related, standards-related or not yet considered by Council, no substantive comment should be given without Council authority or appropriate professional advice.

A holding response may be used, for example:

"Thank you for your enquiry. Otterhampton Parish Council is considering the matter and will respond once the relevant information has been checked."

6. Press releases and public statements

Press releases and public statements may be issued where they relate to:

- decisions made by the Council.
- public consultations.
- events, meetings or notices.
- community projects.
- emergency or safety information.
- factual updates about Council services or assets.

Press releases must normally be approved by the Clerk/RFO and Chairman before issue.

Where the matter is significant, contentious or outside existing Council policy, approval should be by Council resolution.

A press release must not:

- disclose confidential information.
- disclose personal data without lawful basis.
- contain party political material.
- make defamatory or unsubstantiated allegations.
- criticise individuals unfairly.
- present a personal view as a Council position.
- pre-empt a decision that has not yet been made.

7. Political impartiality and election periods

Council publicity must not be used for party political purposes or to promote a candidate, political party or individual councillor.

During pre-election periods, also known as periods of heightened sensitivity, the Council will take particular care that publicity is factual, necessary, proportionate and politically neutral. If there is any doubt, the Clerk/RFO should seek advice from SALC, the Monitoring Officer or the relevant elections team before publication.

8. Confidential and personal information

Councillors, staff and representatives must not disclose confidential information or personal data without lawful justification. The Council's Standing Orders state that councillors, staff, contractors and agents must not disclose confidential information or personal data without legal justification.

Media responses must not include:

- personal contact details unless already published for that purpose.
- details of complaints, grievances, disciplinary matters or employment matters.
- personal information about residents, staff, councillors or contractors.
- information relating to legal advice or live legal disputes.
- commercially sensitive information.
- information discussed in confidential session.

If personal data is accidentally disclosed to the media or public, the Clerk/RFO must consider whether the Council's data breach procedure applies.

9. Meetings, filming, photography and recording

The Council recognises the public and press right to report on public meetings. The Council's Standing Orders state that a person attending a meeting may report on the meeting while it is open to the public, including by filming, photographing, audio recording, broadcasting or providing written commentary.

The press must be given reasonable facilities to report on meetings where they are entitled to be present.

However:

- oral reporting or oral commentary during a meeting requires permission under the Council's Standing Orders;
- filming, recording or photography must not disrupt the meeting.
- the Chairman may manage disruptive behaviour in accordance with Standing Orders.
- no recording may take place during any part of a meeting from which the press and public have been lawfully excluded.

The Council may exclude the press and public from a meeting where confidential or sensitive information prejudicial to the public interest is being considered, in accordance with Standing Orders.

10. Social media and online comment

Where Council business is discussed online, councillors and staff must distinguish clearly between:

- official Council communications.
- councillors' personal views.
- party political views.
- community discussion.

Only authorised persons may post official statements on behalf of the Council.

Councillors using personal social media accounts should not:

- imply they are speaking for the Council unless authorised.
- disclose confidential or personal information.
- make comments that breach the Code of Conduct.
- publish abusive, discriminatory or defamatory material.
- enter into prolonged online disputes on behalf of the Council.

Where online discussion becomes abusive, threatening or potentially unlawful, councillors and staff should not engage further and should report the matter to the Clerk/RFO, platform provider or police as appropriate.

11. Accuracy, corrections and complaints

If inaccurate information about the Council is published, the Clerk/RFO, in consultation with the Chairman where appropriate, may request a correction or provide a factual clarification.

The Council will not normally respond to every negative comment, rumour or social media post. A response should be made only where it is necessary to correct a significant factual error, protect public safety, prevent reputational harm or provide important public information.

Complaints about Council communications will be handled under the Council's complaints procedure, where applicable.

12. Emergency or urgent communications

In urgent circumstances, such as public safety issues, severe weather, road closures, flooding, emergency works or disruption to Council services, the Clerk/RFO may issue factual information without prior Council approval where delay would be unreasonable.

Where possible, the Chairman should be consulted before publication. Any urgent communication issued under this section should be reported to the next Council meeting.

13. Use of photographs and images

Photographs and images used in Council communications must be appropriate, accurate and respectful.

The Council should ensure that:

- consent is obtained where required, especially for identifiable individuals.
- extra care is taken before using images of children or vulnerable people.
- images are not misleading or manipulated in a way that changes their meaning.
- copyright or licence terms are respected.
- personal data considerations are checked before publication.

14. Responsibilities Council

The Council is responsible for:

- adopting and reviewing this policy.
- agreeing official positions on significant matters.
- authorising public statements where required.
- ensuring communications remain lawful and impartial.

Chairman

The Chairman may:

- act as a spokesperson where authorised.
- work with the Clerk/RFO on media responses.
- provide civic or representative comment consistent with Council decisions.

Clerk/RFO

The Clerk/RFO is responsible for:

- receiving and coordinating media enquiries.
- preparing factual responses.
- maintaining records of significant press enquiries and statements.
- advising councillors on process.
- ensuring communications are consistent with Council decisions, Standing Orders and relevant policies.

Councillors

Councillors are responsible for:

- complying with this policy and the Code of Conduct.
- making clear when they speak personally rather than for the Council.
- referring media enquiries to the Clerk/RFO.
- not disclosing confidential or personal information.
- not pre-empting Council decisions.

15. Record keeping

The Clerk/RFO should keep a record of significant media enquiries and Council responses, including:

- date of enquiry.
- name and organisation of journalist or media outlet, where known.
- subject matter.
- deadline.
- response given.
- person authorising the response.
- copy of any statement or press release issued.

Routine minor enquiries may be recorded proportionately.

16. Breach of this policy

A breach of this policy may be dealt with as follows:

- for councillors: under the Council's Code of Conduct process, where appropriate.
- for employees: under employment policies and procedures.
- for volunteers or representatives: by withdrawal of authorisation or other proportionate action.
- for serious matters: referral to the Monitoring Officer, police, ICO or legal adviser, as appropriate.

Where a breach involves member conduct, confidential information, personal data or a disputed governance issue, the Clerk/RFO should consider seeking advice from SALC, SLCC, the Monitoring Officer or a sector solicitor.

17. Review

This policy will be reviewed annually, normally at or before the Annual Meeting of the Council, and sooner if required by changes in legislation, guidance, Council practice or operational need.

The Council's Standing Orders provide for annual review of the Council's policy for dealing with the press/media.

Appendix 1 — Standard media response templates

A. Holding response

Thank you for your enquiry. Otterhampton Parish Council is checking the relevant information and will respond as soon as possible.

B. No agreed Council position

Otterhampton Parish Council has not yet considered this matter formally and therefore does not currently have an agreed Council position.

C. Personal capacity wording for councillors

I am commenting in a personal capacity and not on behalf of Otterhampton Parish Council.

D. Confidential matter

The Council is unable to comment on confidential, personal or legally sensitive matters.

E. Factual correction

Otterhampton Parish Council wishes to clarify that [insert factual correction]. The Council's agreed position is [insert agreed position or refer to published minutes].