

September 2023



## Communications (including Press and Media) Policy

Cliffsend Parish Council is committed to the provision of accurate information about its governance, decisions and activities. Where this information is not available via the Council's publication scheme, please contact the Clerk.

### A. General communications

#### 1. Aims

This policy provides guidance to Parish Council members (elected/co-opted Councillors, the Clerk) in the use of online communications, including social media. Social media is a collective term for various methods of publishing on the internet. The policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites, including but not limited to -

- Parish Council website
- Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and other social networking sites
- Twitter (X) and other micro-blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Blogs and discussion forums
- WhatsApp
- Parish Council emails

#### 2. Principles

The primary means of communication used by the Parish Council are -

- Public noticeboards, the Council's own website, Facebook and Instagram
- Documents and reports distributed by email or post

The website is a broadcast medium and widely available. It does not require viewers to sign in or register unless they wish to receive news updates by email. An email address for the Clerk enables people to contact the Parish Council.

Any costs incurred subscribing to and maintaining the Council's website are subject to approval by the Council.

The Parish Council maintains its own Facebook and Instagram platforms to share public information, events and activities only.

#### 3. Duty of care

In general, be careful what you say and more so of what you write. Freedom of expression is restrained by the need to respect an individual's rights to privacy.

Unless agreed and minuted, individuals should not be referred to by name or location in Council minutes. It may be necessary to redact or expunge any such entries at draft stage or later.

It is recommended that Councillors exercise restraint in embracing social media and networking. They should avoid using their 'Councillor' title to avoid any misunderstanding that their postings are endorsed by the Council. Where a Councillor is a well known figure in the community, such separation of identities may be difficult; they are likely to have a 'blurred identity'.

Since the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a Councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role. You will therefore be bound by the Code of Conduct adopted by the Council. Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your Councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Councillors must ensure that they always comply with the Council's adopted Code of Conduct and refrain from any activity or utterance that could be deemed in breach of the Code, bringing the Council into disrepute.

As with other communications, online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. Submissions uploaded to the web are usually a permanent feature and difficult to retract or erase.

Councillors have the same legal and moral duties online as anyone else. Failures to comply with the law may have serious consequences. If, for example, election campaign material is posted to a website, it must conform to the same stipulations applicable to a printed leaflet. Democratic Services at the District Council and the Electoral Commission can advise on such matters.

#### **4. Cliffsend Parish Council website**

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular Councillor, promote an individual Councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the Council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

The Council will appoint a nominated "Webmaster" to maintain and update the Parish Council website. The appointee may be an unpaid Councillor or other volunteer or the Clerk. Where the Clerk agrees to undertake this duty, the Webmaster role will be covered by the Clerk's contracted hours of employment. Where servicing the website entails additional hours, remuneration will be subject to agreement of the Council.

The website may include such matters as -

- Details of Councillors as agreed – including links to Declarations of Pecuniary Interest (DPI)
- Committees/Working Groups and their membership
- Meeting dates, agendas and minutes (draft/final form)
- News items of local interest
- Announcements relevant to Council activities
- Vacancies
- Events and activities – other communal organisations
- Sharing public information e.g. Police, TDC, planning, health.

Councillors are required to have an email address exclusively for Council business which must be encrypted at both ends. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published Councillor e-mail address.

Where someone contacts the Council via the Clerk, receipt will be acknowledged and the communication will be reported to the Council at the next available meeting under 'Correspondence received'. However, a fuller response or resolution may require research or consideration by a Committee or Working Group or Council meeting.

## **5. Further Guidance**

Where a Councillor uses social media (including email), the following will apply -

All social media sites in use should be checked and updated regularly to ensure security settings are in place.

When participating in any online communication;

- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
- Do not represent yourself as contributing on behalf of the Council and take care to avoid making false or misleading statements.
- Parish Councillors should be mindful of what they publish. Apart from protecting the reputation of the Council, ensure personal opinions are not liable to be seen as being that of the Council.
- Follow guidance regarding the form and content of posting. Be respectful and informative, never condescending.

Respect the privacy of other Councillors and residents;

- Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
- Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
- Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
- Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, see below libel and copyright.

## **6. Defamation**

Councillors or parishioners who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Clerk of the Council.

You may be exposed to claim for damages if -

- You publish an untrue statement about a person,
- You repeat such a statement, whether attributed or not, in an email.

## **7. Copyright**

Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in prosecution.

## **8. Data Protection**

The Data Protection Act and General Data Protection Regulations place responsibilities on all of us to refrain from disclosing personal information about people without their explicit permission. Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

## **9. Bias and pre-determination**

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

## **10. Obscene material**

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

## **B. Press and Media (press, radio, TV, internet)**

### **1. Introduction**

The purpose 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.

It is not the intention 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.

The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and conveying information to residents in a positive and constructive manner.

The press should have access to Council members and background information to assist them in giving accurate information to the public. The Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts.

### **2. The legal framework**

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 Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

The Parish Council must have regard for the Transparency Code for smaller authorities, December 2014.

The Parish Council's adopted Standing Orders should be adhered to.

### **3. Contact with the media**

All Members should always have due regard for the reputation of the Council. To ensure consistency and accountability pronouncements to media should only be delivered by the Clerk or elected officers, being the Chairman or Vice-chairman. Statements should ensure that they reflect the Council's opinion.

Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks occur, an investigation is almost certain to follow.

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, or appropriate advisor.

### **4. Attendance of media at Council meetings.**

The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings. Any photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a meeting of the Council and its committees/working parties (which includes e.g. using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV/radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums, or social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) should be advised prior to the meeting.

### **5. Press releases**

The purpose of a press release is to create awareness of a matter of public interest and set out the Council's position. A Member may be called upon to compose an announcement. However, all press releases will emanate from the Clerk or elected officer.

## **C. Policy review**

This Policy will be reviewed on an annual basis.