
Press and Media Protocol

Westerham Town Council

**Reviewed March 2015
Reviewed March 2020
Reviewed July 2024**

REVIEWED 4 YEARLY

WESTERHAM TOWN COUNCIL

PRESS AND MEDIA PROTOCOL

Introduction

The purpose of this Protocol is to guide both Councillors and Officers of the Council in their relations with the Press and Media, in such a way as to ensure the smooth running of the Council.

This protocol does not seek to be either prescriptive or comprehensive but sets out to provide guidance on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with the Press and Media.

This protocol seeks to establish good working relations with the Press as this can substantially aid Community Action.

Above everything else, a Councillor must observe Westerham Town Council's Code of Conduct whenever he/she conducts the business of the Council, conducts the business of the office to which he/she has been elected/appointed or acts as a representative of the authority.

Clerk and Officers of the Council

The Clerk as the Proper Officer of the Council is authorised to receive all communications from the Press and Media and to issue Press Statements on behalf of the Council. In the absence of the Clerk, media communications will be handled by the Assistant Clerk. In the absence of both of these officers enquirers will be referred to the Chairman who will act as the spokesperson for the purposes of this element of the policy. All communications made by the Clerk will relate to the stated business and day to day management of the activities or adopted policy of the Council. The Clerk is not expected or authorised to speculate on matters that have not been considered by the Council. Where such questions are put to the Clerk he/she should refer the enquirer to the Chairman or a Committee Chairman as considered appropriate.

No other officer of the Council apart from the above, unless authorised by the Clerk, is permitted to speak or communicate with the Press and Media on any matter affecting the Council or its business.

Members of the Council

- A Councillor must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press on any matter which has been

discussed under confidential items on the Council's or Committees' agenda or at any other private briefing.

- A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Westerham Town Council.
- When speaking or providing written material to the Press and Media, Councillors should make clear the capacity, in which they are providing the information. For example: -
 - as Chairman
 - as Chairman of a Committee
 - as an individual (i.e. letter to press for publication)
- A Councillor should never use the prefix "Cllr" when writing to the press as an individual. This implies that he/she is stating Council policy. A copy of any written material sent to the Press and Media by a Member, as *representing the Council*, must be forwarded to the Clerk.
- Councillors should take particular care if the press or media approach them for comment on a controversial subject and should not be led into stating something that he/she did not really mean to say. If unsure about any particular policy, they should simply state "no comment" and ask the press to contact the Council Offices.
- Councillors should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the rights to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful about expressing individual views to the press or media, whether or not they relate to matters of Council business. Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made, and whilst it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make clear that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in an open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the press.
- A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer at meetings held in public or before the press.

Dealing with the Press

When dealing with the Press verbally, Councillors and officers should:

- Be informed and certain of all their facts.

- Ensure that, when making comments on behalf of the Town Council that they are aware what Council Policy is and that their comments reflect that policy.
- Be calm.
- Ensure that their comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or its staff into disrepute and that comments are not libellous or slanderous.

Issues to be Aware of

- Councillors and officers not used to dealing with the press may be surprised when they see that statements made in all innocence look very different in print from what they thought they had said It is advantageous to write out a statement or position beforehand.

Meetings of Council and Committees

Copies of Agenda, Minutes and Reports sent to Members for meetings of the Council or its Committees will be placed on the Council's web site.

Facilities will be provided at meetings for the Press to take notes of the proceedings.

As provided in the Council's Standing Orders, both the Press and Public may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion.

The Town Council is governed by the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act, 1960.

Press Releases

- All press releases made on behalf of the Council will be prepared by the Clerk following any meetings of Council, Committees, Sub-Committees, Working and Steering Groups.
- The Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman, is also authorised to publish press releases on any urgent matters where there is insufficient time for a Council meeting.

This document has been prepared as a guidance note for officers and elected members. It represents the policy of the Council in respect of its relationships

with the Press and Media. The policy has been prepared to ensure consistency in the Council's dealing with the Press and Media and details who is authorised to speak on behalf of the Council. It has been drafted to ensure that the views and policy of the Council are presented accurately.

The overriding principle of this policy is that all elements of the Press and Media will be treated equally.