



PRESS & MEDIA POLICY

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This Press and Media Policy was adopted by the council at its meeting held on 20th May 2025.

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within Ashington Town Council for working with the press and media and deals with the day-to-day relationship between the Council and the media.

1.2 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. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, provide information on Council services.

2. Key Aims and Principles

2.1 The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions, and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media -- press, radio, TV, internet -- 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 policies and priorities.

2.2 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 Members 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.

2.3 The key principles that guide the Council's approach to press and media are:

- Openness
- Transparency
- Accountability
- Impartiality

3. The Legal Framework

3.1 This policy is subject to the councils' statutory obligations set out in the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018, the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), the Localism Act 2011, the Equality Act 2010, the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, and the Councils Standing Orders.

3.2 The Council must also have regard to the Government's Recommended Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 which is grouped into seven principles, where publicity must be:

- Lawful
- Cost effective
- Objective
- Even-handed
- Appropriate

- Have regard to equality and diversity
- Be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

4. Contact with the Media

4.1 Statements made must reflect the Council's opinion.

4.2 Any Member may 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. Members must adhere to the Council's Code of Conduct when engaging with the media and should not bring the Council into disrepute.

4.3 When speaking to the media in a personal capacity, Members should:

- Clearly state they are speaking in a personal capacity
- Not use Council resources for personal communications
- Not disclose confidential information obtained through their position as a Councillor
- Respect the democratic decisions of the Council, even when they disagree with them

4.4 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. 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.

4.5 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be issued by the Executive Officer following agreement by the Council or relevant Committee. If individual Members choose to send letters to express their own opinions on Council policies, they are strongly advised to check their facts first with the Executive Officer. It should always be made clear whether the views put forward are those of the Council or of an individual Member.

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

4.7 Unexpected approaches from representatives of the media can lead to unguarded comments being made and great care must be therefore taken to avoid misrepresentation of the council's policy or its position on the matter in question.

4.8 Reporters should be directed to contact the Executive Officer if they want to carry out an interview or obtain a statement about the Council's business and actions.

4.9 Except in the most straightforward cases, the caller should be informed that a statement will be made within 24 hours, and they should be asked to set out clearly what they want to know. This will allow time for the Executive Officer to consult with the Chair or relevant Committee Chairs, in producing a response within a reasonable time.

4.10 Any verbal or written statement given by the Executive Officer must represent the corporate position and views of the Council not the individual views of Members or staff held in their official capacity.

4.11 Where the matters concerned have not been discussed by the Council, an immediate response cannot be made, and this should be made clear to the enquirer.

5. Crisis Communications

5.1 In crisis situations where the Council needs to respond quickly and effectively to emerging events, the following procedure will be followed:

5.2 The Executive Officer will be the primary point of contact for all media enquiries during a crisis, unless otherwise designated.

5.3 The Executive Officer will consult with the Chair or relevant Committee Chairs to agree a response. This may include a 'no comment' statement if appropriate.

5.4 If the crisis escalates, a small Crisis Communications Team may be established, comprising the Executive Officer, Chair, and relevant Committee Chairs or subject matter experts.

5.5 All other Officers and Members should direct media enquiries to the Executive Officer during a crisis and refrain from making individual statements.

5.6 The Council will endeavour to provide regular updates on its website and social media channels during the crisis, as appropriate.

6. General Media Relations

6.1 Officers and Members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

6.2 Confidential documents, exempt minutes, reports, papers, and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. 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.

6.3 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 before any response is made.

6.4 There are a number of personal privacy issues for Officers and Members that must be handled carefully and sensitively in accordance with the council's policies on Freedom of Information, Data Protection, and UK GDPR. These issues include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number, disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Executive Officer before any response is made to the media.

6.5 All communications must comply with the Equality Act 2010 and must not discriminate against, harass or victimise any person on the grounds of the nine protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation).

6.6 The Council will proactively work with the media to publicise important information and events.

7. Attendance of Media at Council or Committee Meetings

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

7.2 Seating will be made available should the media wish to attend Council and Committee meetings.

8. Filming and Recording of Meetings

8.1 In accordance with the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, members of the public, press and other media representatives are permitted to film, photograph, audio record and report on all public meetings of the Council and its committees.

8.2 The Council will provide reasonable facilities to enable this, including designated seating areas where possible.

8.3 Anyone recording a meeting is asked to respect the following guidelines:

- Notify the Executive Officer in advance of the meeting
- Remain in the designated area and not interfere with the meeting
- Not film or record members of the public who have actively objected to being filmed
- Cease recording if the meeting resolves to exclude the press and public due to the confidential nature of business
- Edit recordings with care to avoid misinterpretation

8.4 The Chair will remind those present at the start of each meeting that it may be recorded, and the meeting agenda will include a statement to this effect.

9. Elections and Pre- Election Period

9.1 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 position they hold in the Council.

9.2 During the pre-election period, from the publication of the Notice of Election until polling day the following restrictions apply:

9.3 Officers will issue no releases quoting Council Members. During this period, any quotes will be from Officers only.

9.4 The Council will not publish material which:

- Appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party
- Contains political arguments or refers to issues that divide opinion along party lines
- Contains quotes from or images of candidates or political party logos

9.5 The Council will continue to publish:

- Factual information about Council services
- Necessary announcements and statements on issues of public health and safety

- Responses to direct questions about existing Council policies, provided they are presented objectively

9.6 If in doubt about whether publicity is permitted during the pre-election period, the Executive Officer should be consulted.

10. Press Releases

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

10.2 The Executive Officer will use their own judgement and support those opportunities for a press release, as identified in paragraph 10.1. In any such instance all press releases will be made by the Executive Officer, or delegated officer, to ensure there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored.

11. Notices

11.1 The Council website will be used to convey information on matters of interest and latest news and will be updated regularly by officers.

11.2 The Council notice boards will be used for the advertising of council information.

12. Social Media

12.1 With the rise in the use of social media such as Facebook and Instagram, Members and Officers need to be fully aware of the implications of using these products. All social media should only be used to present information about the Council or its decisions, where the person posting the information is identified as being associated with the Council.

12.2 The Council has Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn accounts. These will be used by Officers to provide and share information on services and events in Ashington that may be of interest to the community.

12.3 Members' Personal Social Media Accounts:

- Members who identify themselves as Councillors on personal social media accounts must make it clear when they are expressing personal views rather than representing the Council
- The Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication
- Members should be respectful and not post comments that they would not be prepared to make face to face
- Members should not disclose confidential information obtained through their role as a Councillor
- Members should consider the tone and language used on social media, recognising their position in the community

12.4 Management of Council Social Media:

- Only designated Officers should post content on official Council social media accounts
- All content must be factual, objective, appropriate, and free from party political bias
- Comments containing offensive language, personal attacks, discriminatory content or spam will be hidden or removed
- The Council reserves the right to block users who repeatedly post inappropriate content
- During controversial discussions, the Council will focus on providing factual information and not engage in debates

12.5 Everyone is expected to read and comply with the Councils' Social Media and Email Policy which includes guidelines on appropriate content, monitoring, and security.

13. GDPR and Privacy

13.1 All communications, including press releases, social media posts, and website content, must comply with the Data Protection Act 2018 and UK GDPR.

13.2 The Council will:

- Obtain explicit consent before publishing photographs or personal information about individuals
- Not share personal information about residents or other third parties with the media without consent
- Consider data protection principles when responding to media inquiries that involve individuals
- Regularly review its communications to ensure personal data is being handled appropriately

13.3 Where consent is required for publishing photographs or information about individuals, this consent must be:

- Freely given and specific
- Informed and unambiguous
- Recorded and stored securely
- Easy to withdraw

14. Accessibility

14.1 In line with the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018, the Council will ensure that its communications are accessible to all members of the community.

14.2 The Council will:

- Use plain English in all communications
- Provide alternative formats of documents upon request

- Ensure website content meets Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standard
- Consider the needs of people with disabilities when preparing press releases and social media content
- Avoid using colours or fonts that may make content difficult to read
- Include alt text for images on social media and the website

15. MONITORING AND REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

The Executive Officer shall be responsible for reviewing this policy annually, or sooner if there are significant legislative changes, to ensure that it meets legal requirements and reflects best practice.

Any proposed amendments to this policy shall be reported to and approved by the Council.