

# Stone

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## Town Council



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## Press and Media Protocol

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August 2021

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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- 1.1 Stone Town Council regularly receives enquiries from the media, both to the office and to Councillors and in some circumstances the Council, or Councillors personally, will instigate media contact. In addition, staff and Councillors may have their own social media sites, such as on Facebook or Twitter, and/or post to social media sites owned by others.
- 1.2 The purpose of this protocol is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Town Clerk, all officers and Members involved in dealing with any aspect of the media, including social media, and to provide guidance on how to handle media enquiries.
- 1.3 The Council recognises the need for openness and this should be reflected in how media communication is dealt with.
- 1.4 This protocol aims to ensure that the Council, its members and its officers are seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner in any circumstance where it could be perceived by the reader that they are acting in an official capacity. In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be:
  - open and honest
  - proactive
  - responsive and timely
- 1.5 It must be remembered at all times that very few members of the public, and even some members of the media, do not understand Council procedures and protocols and may find it difficult to differentiate between when an individual is acting in an official capacity and when they are acting as a private individual. It is therefore incumbent upon the councillor/officer to ensure that all of their communications are clear in this respect and follow the guidance for official communications unless it is very clear that they are acting in a personal capacity.
- 1.6 In any event, even in a personal capacity, no councillor or officer should enter into any communication which could unreasonably bring the Council into disrepute.

# 2 HANDLING MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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- 2.1 The Town Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries made to the Council Offices and reply directly where the enquiry is a question of fact. In other circumstances it may be more appropriate for the Town Mayor, the Chair of a Committee, or another Councillor specifically involved in an issue to respond to the enquiry, in which case the Town Clerk will contact them as appropriate.
- 2.2 Other officers who are directly approached by a member of the media should normally refer all enquiries to the Town Clerk, rather than attempting to answer

questions direct, other than for simple, factual queries (e.g. what time is Tuesday's meeting).

- 2.3 Councillors who are directly approached by a member of the media should always respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol.
- 2.4 The Council, individual councillors and staff should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members.
- 2.5 The Council has a responsibility to act in an open and accountable way, and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

### 3 NEWS, PRESS RELEASES AND WEBSITE/SOCIAL MEDIA POSTINGS

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- 3.1 News/press releases and Website/Social Media/YouTube postings are key techniques for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements. All of these types of activity, and any other related activity which involves dissemination of information or opinion to the public, are referred to as "releases" within this document. Where used, this term relates to any and all information streams available unless specifically identified otherwise.
- 3.2 There are two main types of releases – official Council releases and Councillor releases.
- 3.3 **Official Council Releases** – The Town Clerk is authorised to issue official releases and to talk to the media on behalf of the Council as a whole. Such releases will be non-party political and will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council.
- 3.4 Where appropriate, official media releases will include a quote from the relevant Councillor(s). This would usually be the Town Mayor or a Committee Chairman. Such quotes would be agreed between the Councillor quoted and the Town Clerk.
- 3.5 Releases will not seek to promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors (other than official Mayoral activities), identify a Member's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.
- 3.6 **Councillor Releases** - Councillor releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. Such releases:
  - a. May or may not be political, other than in the case of the Town Mayor, where they should never be political.
  - b. Should not include the name of any officer, use the Council crest/logo or use the Council telephone number as a point of contact.
  - c. Should not refer to any position held by the author within the Council (e.g. Chairmanship of a Committee), unless agreed in advance with the Town Clerk for items of a non-political nature.

- d. Should be factually accurate in respect of the Council’s corporate view, situation, actions and decisions made or not made. (Advice can be sought from the Town Clerk if a Member is in any doubt.)
  - e. Should always be clear that the views contained are personal to the author and not necessarily the Council’s view.
- 3.7 As outlined in paragraph 1.5 above, care must be taken to avoid misleading the public as to the source of, and support for, information or opinion released. In particular:
- a. All releases where it may be possible for a member of the public to perceive that the information has come from, or has the support of, the Council should be treated as an official Council release.
  - b. All other releases which may be perceived as relating to Council business should be treated as Councillor releases.
  - c. Authors should not refer to themselves as “Councillor” in any release does not relate to Council business, in order to prevent any possibility of confusion by members of the public.

## 4 INTERVIEWS

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- 4.1 Any Member contacted by a journalist or similar requesting an interview or a comment should ascertain whether that person is seeking a Council view or the view of the Member as an individual. If the former, the guidance set out below for officers contacted by journalists should be followed in the same way. If an individual view is being sought, the guidance for releases above should be followed.
- 4.2 The requirements in paragraph 4.1 above also relates to non-journalist or self-generated interviews or presentations of the kind most often seen on websites, social media and YouTube.
- 4.3 Any officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview or a comment should refer the journalist to the Town Clerk, the Town Mayor or the appropriate Committee Chair. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist.
- 4.4 In any event, officers should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of the Council’s approved and agreed policies.

## 5 MEDIA ACTIVITY AHEAD OF AND DURING MEETINGS

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- 5.1 The media pick up many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All Council and Committee agendas are automatically sent to the local media, displayed on town notice boards and published on the Town Council website.
- 5.2 Members of the media are welcome to attend and regularly do attend Council and Committee meetings. During meetings Members should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture, rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what can be a complex issue or report.

## 6 PUBLICITY IN ELECTION PERIODS

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- 6.1 The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (Purdah) all proactive publicity about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections.
- 6.2 During this period council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.
- 6.3 In these circumstances quotes in press releases will be avoided wherever possible. Where a quote is required, however, that quote will be from the Town Clerk in accordance with the guidelines in this protocol.

## 7 NON-COUNCIL RELATED MEDIA ACTIVITY

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- 7.1 Officers and Members of the Council who have contact with the media or make releases in a personal capacity or as members of non-Council related organisations must not describe themselves as a councillor nor refer to their Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.

## 8 CORRECTING INACCURATE REPORTING

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- 8.1 Should the media, social media, a website or similar publish/broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it.
- 8.2 The issue should be discussed with the Town Clerk as soon as possible to allow him to determine an appropriate action and who is the most appropriate person to take that action. This could be, for example, a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. Where a news release is to be issued, the Clerk will consult with appropriate Committee Chairman and, where appropriate, with the Member who has issued the incorrect information.
- 8.3 It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain.
- 8.4 Each case must be judged individually.
- 8.5 Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by holding hands up, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.

## 9 USE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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- 9.1 Internet use covers all websites, networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter etc., forums and blogs which may be used by both officers and Councillors.
- 9.2 If the above are used in an official capacity or on Council related business, the guidance in this protocol must be adhered to in the same way as for any other media contact and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.
- 9.3 For example, whilst acting in an official Stone Town Council capacity Members and officers should not:
  - a. Undertake any action that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
  - b. Process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
  - c. Promote any political party or undertake any campaigning
  - d. Promote personal financial interests or commercial activities
  - e. Be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner

- 9.4 If social media and the internet are used in an unofficial capacity, Members and Officers should restrain from anything that could be construed as bringing the Council into disrepute.

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