

Stalmine-with-Staynall Parish Council

Press, Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy

1. Introduction

Stalmine-with-Staynall Parish Council welcomes enquiries from the press and media and recognises that its relationship with the press helps communication with residents. The Council seeks to be as transparent as possible, co-operating at all times with the press and using the opportunities of the media to publicise events being organised.

The press is permitted to attend all meetings of the council and its committees, unless excluded under the Public Bodies Admission to Meetings Act 1960. Its representatives are not, however, invited to attend any working group meetings that are informal fact-finding sessions only and are not official council meetings.

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables the Parish Council to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves.

The Council has a website and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

2. Purpose

The aim of the policy is to ensure that Stalmine-with-Staynall Parish Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner and reflect, as far as possible, the corporate view of the council. It aims to guide both councillors and officers in their relations with the press and media.

The council wishes to respond to the growth of social media channels and recognises that posts and comments made by members of the council could reflect directly on the organisation. The policy does not seek to be prescriptive or comprehensive but sets out the required protocol for councillors who communicate their thoughts and views through social media channels.

3. Scope

The Press and Media Policy includes:

1. Official council releases
2. Councillor press releases
3. Freedom of Information requests
4. Press protocol
5. Social media protocol
6. Parish council website
7. Parish council email
8. SMS texting
9. Internal communication and access to information within the Council.

4. Policy

4.1 Official Council Releases

- a. Official council press releases and statements will be prepared or overseen by the Parish Clerk as the Proper Officer in consultation with other councillors as required;
- b. The Chairman and Parish Clerk will act as the council's Press Officers. Any official contact with the media concerning the council's policies, the decisions it makes and services it provides is to be initiated through the Chairman/Parish Clerk;
- c. The Parish Clerk, in consultation with the Parish Chairman, is also authorised to publish press releases on any matters where there is insufficient time for a council meeting.
- d. The Parish 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 Parish Clerk the enquirer will be referred to the Chairman or a committee chairman as considered appropriate.
- e. Councillors who identify a media opportunity should discuss this with the Parish Clerk who will, in consultation with other councillors as appropriate, decide how this will be followed up;
- f. If a councillor or an employee receives an approach or enquiry from the media about any matter relating to the Parish Council, it should be referred to the Chairman/Parish Clerk.

4.2 Councillor Press Releases

- a. Individual councillors can make their own statements relating to local issues and this policy is not designed to prevent any councillor expressing a personal opinion through the media. Councillors must make it clear that any view expressed that differs from council policy is their own personal view and should be recorded as such;
- b. Such releases may or may not be political, should bear no reference whatsoever to the council or any officer and must not use the council logo. The council address, telephone number or website should not be included as a point of contact; never use the prefix 'councillor' when corresponding with the press as an individual;
- c. Where a journalist wishes to confirm what was said by an individual councillor during a council meeting, they will be referred to the Parish Clerk.
- d. A councillor must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature.
- e. 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.

4.3 Freedom of Information Requests

- a. All requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act are to be referred to the Parish Clerk who in routine cases will arrange for the information request to be satisfied in accordance with the legislation.

4.4 Press Protocol

- a. The Chairman and Parish Clerk are responsible for issuing official press releases on behalf of the Parish Council;
- b. No other officer of the council, unless previously authorised by council resolution and in consultation with the Chairman/Parish Clerk, is permitted to speak or communicate with the press or media on any matter of official council business.
- c. When the media seek information on an issue that is, or likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then legal advice should be obtained before any response is made;
- d. During election year, from the issue of the Notice of Election until the day following the election, officers should not normally issue press releases;
- e. All official press releases and other materials are copied and filed for reference by the Parish Clerk.

f. When dealing with the press verbally, ensure that your comments and views will not bring the council, its councillors or officers into disrepute and ensure that comments are not slanderous.

4.5 Social Media Protocol

a. When using social media sites councillors should not use the term 'councillor' or give the impression, directly or implied, that they are writing on behalf of the council. Members should, however, be mindful of the fact that they are a councillor and should be aware of the council's Code of Conduct and any legal implications if they are posting comments or views on social media about individual councillors or council employees or sharing information about the council;

b. Social media should not be used as a platform to discuss council policy and councillors who wish to challenge the council's procedures must refer their concerns to the Parish Clerk in the first instance;

c. Councillors are not permitted to share the outcomes of closed working groups or fact-finding sessions on social media;

4.6 Parish Council Website

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

The Council may, at its discretion, allow and enable approved local groups to have and maintain a presence on its website for the purpose of presenting information about the group's activities. The local group would be responsible for maintaining the content and ensuring that it meets the Council's 'rules and expectation' for the website. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the website if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's 'rules and expectation' for its website. Where content on the website is maintained by a local group it should be clearly marked that such content is not the direct responsibility of the Council.

4.7 Parish Council email

The Clerk to the council has their own council email address:

clerk@stalmineparishcouncil.org

The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can.

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

All new emails requiring data to be passed on, will be followed up with a data consent form for completion before action is taken with that correspondence.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. NB any emails copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

4.8 SMS (texting)

Members and the Clerk may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

4.9 Internal communication and access to information within the Council

The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

5. General Guidance

Social media include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Facebook • Twitter • YouTube • Blogs and various discussion forums • LinkedIn • E-mail

A few legal matters!

Defamation: This term covers libel (written) and slander (spoken) and relates to the publication of any untrue statement about a person that is damaging to their reputation.

Data Protection: Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless their written permission has been obtained.

Bias and Pre-determination: The Localism Act 2011 sought to remove the concept of pre-determination but it still exists. Although the council is only a consultee on planning applications, rather than the determining body, it is wise to avoid publishing anything that might suggest that members do not have an open mind on these matters. The much-quoted example of pre-determination is “over my dead body!”

Copyright: Placing images or text on the website from a copyrighted source without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything unless permission has been granted.

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share

confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council’s Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Members should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e., to avoid use of the ‘Reply to All’ option, if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

Online posts should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the internet is permanent. The key to whether online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether the councillor is giving the impression that he/she is acting as a councillor. It is the perception that counts. If the perception is that a councillor is acting as a councillor, the provisions of the Code of Conduct apply. In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. It is also worth remembering the Nolan Principles (as enshrined in the Code of Conduct) when working with social media.

If a councillor owns a Twitter or Facebook account there are a few key points to note: Default on Twitter accounts is for everyone and anyone to follow you. Facebook is moving towards that approach. Even if it is a personal account, you are still a councillor - any opinions shared could and would be associated with the council.

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