

OFFICER REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

Subject: False and Misleading Public Statements, Cease and Desist Correspondence and Next Steps

Date: 24 July 2025

1. Background

On 14 July 2025, a press release entitled *"Local Councillor Pays for Defibrillator After Parish Council Breaks Funding Promise"* was issued by a local political group via its representative. The release made several inaccurate and derogatory claims regarding the decisions and conduct of Chigwell Parish Council. Among the assertions were that the Council failed to honour a funding commitment, thereby forcing a councillor to step in and provide personal funds.

The release was circulated to multiple media outlets including the BBC, *Essex Live* and other regional media publications. It was also published on the organisation's website and social media channels under the heading *"Cllr xx Covers Defib Costs After Parish Council Backtracks"*. These claims misrepresented the Council's legal obligations and decision-making processes and risked causing significant reputational harm.

2. Action Taken by Officers

Upon receipt, officers issued a formal cease and desist letter requiring the immediate retraction of the statement, public correction of the record and confirmation that no further misleading material would be published.

Subsequent correspondence confirmed that:

- The article has been withdrawn from the organisation's website.
- A correction was posted on the organisation's primary social media channel.
- Correction notices were issued to external media outlets who had received the press release, including those mentioned above.

Screenshots and confirmations of these actions have been received and are held on file.

3. Source of Misleading Information

The individual who issued the release has confirmed in writing that the content was based solely on information provided by a current member of this Council. It is now evident that this information was inaccurate, omitted key facts and created a wholly misleading public narrative.

The following verified facts were omitted or misrepresented:

- The defibrillator and cabinet were purchased by residents in March 2024 for £1,673.99 using their own funds.
- A £1,000 grant application was submitted retrospectively in September 2024, which officers correctly deemed unlawful under financial regulations as was a request to contribute towards the already purchased cabinet.
- In June 2025, the Council lawfully approved the purchase of replacement battery and pads totalling £1,050 (£875 plus VAT), exceeding the original grant request.
- The Councillor referenced in the press release made a personal donation of £700 to the fundraising group over a year after the defibrillator had been purchased and installed at the same time the Council agreed to the purchase of the battery and pads

4. Commentary on Conduct and Reputation

The claims published were not only misleading but presented in a manner highly derogatory toward the Council. They suggested a failure of duty and intentional obstruction by the authority, despite the Council acting within statutory and financial constraints at all times. The tone and content of the release significantly risk bringing the Council into disrepute.

The individual responsible for originating the claims has not, to date, issued any public retraction or apology in their own name. Officers advise that Council consider writing formally to request evidence that a retraction and apology be personally issued by the councillor concerned. A failure to do so leaves the misleading narrative unresolved and allows reputational damage to persist.

5. Considerations for Council

Council may wish to consider:

- Formally requesting the councillor provide evidence of an apology and retraction in their own name.
- Whether the actions breach the Council's Code of Conduct and if so whether to refer the matter to the Monitoring Officer.
- Reviewing compliance with the Council's Media, Communications and Email Policy, which prohibits public statements about Council business without written authorisation or that misrepresent the Council and its decisions.
- Any other measures the Council considers appropriate in view of the damage caused and seriousness of the misrepresentation.

6. Recommendation

That Chigwell Parish Council:

1. Notes the content of this report and the officers' actions to safeguard the Council's reputation.
2. Requests the councillor concerned provide documented evidence of a personal retraction on all their social media sites and makes a written apology to the Council.
3. Considers what further steps may be appropriate in relation to the matter, including referral under the Code of Conduct, reviewing the Council's Media, Communications and Email Policy or other procedural remedies.