

## **MEMBERS’ MEDIA RELATIONS PROTOCOL**

### **Introduction**

This document sets out how media relations should be handled across Mendip District Council.

The purpose is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of members, and provide guidance on how to handle media enquiries.

It is designed to ensure that the council maximises opportunities for positive media coverage, minimises negative coverage, and provides a fast and effective service to the media.

The communications team deals with media enquiries, issues press releases, organises photo-calls and broadcast interviews. To ensure all this activity is co-ordinated effectively, it is important that it is channelled through one central point.

The only exception to this is publicity of a political nature, which is handled by the individual political groups.

### **The legal context**

This protocol reflects the guidance contained in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2001 (as amended).

*Key points are:*

- The council should not publish material designed to affect public support for a political party.
- Any publicity describing the council’s policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts and explanations.
- Publicity paid for by the council should not in any way be designed to influence support for a political party.
- The purpose of a press release is to promote the council’s services or policies and any quotes used should reflect this.

### **Approach to publicity**

It is vital that the council communicates regularly with the media, as it plays such an important role in informing residents about what we do and how we spend their money.

Wherever possible the council will meet media requests for information and interviews. This approach will help us ensure that the council is recognised as open, accountable and accessible.

### **Planning / identifying newsworthy items**

Media activity needs to be planned as far ahead as possible to ensure a good spread of news stories being sent out at relevant times.

Members are requested to notify the communications team as soon as they become aware of a good or bad news story, or of any potentially controversial issues, policies, decisions or events.

### **Handling media enquiries / interview requests**

The communications team will co-ordinate media enquiries that come in to the council and arrange appropriate responses. They will prioritise enquiries, source relevant information and arrange interviews.

Simple, factual queries may be dealt with by the communications officer without reference to other officers or executive members. If the relevant officer or cabinet member is unable to supply information for a response within deadline, the communications officer will aim to a holding statement which avoids detail but which seek to protect the council – for example: ‘The matter is being investigated’. We will avoid ‘no comment’ at all times. The council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

When the communications team receives an interview request for a council representative, it will consider factors such as: the appropriate person; their availability; media training the person has undergone and the aptitude shown; the necessity of a brief / time available to draft a brief, and whether the interview is a live recording or pre-recorded.

The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist.

### **If a communications officer contacts a member with a media query**

Members are requested to return their call or email them as soon as possible. By missing a deadline, a story will appear without a council comment – it won’t wait or go away and the council’s reputation could suffer.

Members should give the communications officer as much information as possible. Withholding vital details could delay things or lead to inaccurate information being released. The query is an opportunity to achieve positive publicity for your service or to correct misleading views. At the very least it is an opportunity for damage limitation.

### **Press releases**

Press releases are one of the key techniques for publicising council activities, decisions and achievements.

The communications team will issue all press releases on behalf of the council. This ensures that releases follow a style appropriate to the media being targeted.

All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the cabinet and council and contain the relevant facts.

Where a press release requires a quote from a member, the relevant executive member will be used.

Statements from other members will be included when they are:

- Commenting as chair of a committee
- Commenting as the chair of a quasi-judicial forum
- Representing a local area specifically affected by a change in service
- Representing an area affected by a major event or incident

A relevant officer may also be quoted to provide factual or technical information, or if the appropriate member is unavailable.

In most cases the communications officer will draft a quote based on the information given and get this agreed by the member / officer.

Final approval for news releases will be sought from the originator and their ~~service-Group M~~anager.

In the case of sensitive, significant or controversial issues approval may also be sought from the relevant Group Manager or a member of the ~~Corporate-Strategic Management-Leadership~~ Team.

### **Meetings**

The media pick up stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. All council papers are sent to local media.

Communications staff aim to attend Cabinet and Council pre-agenda meetings to try to identify issues that may attract media interest, or that need to be communicated to a wider audience.

In addition, where possible, officers and executive members should make the communications team aware of any potentially newsworthy items due to be considered at public meetings the earliest possible date. This includes planning, scrutiny, licensing, area partnerships, Mendip Strategic Partnership etc.

It may then be possible to issue a news release, summarising the main points of the report, at the same time that the papers go out. This type of release is usually very useful to journalists who would not otherwise read an agenda and may help secure coverage.

Press releases confirming the decisions taken at meetings will be issued at the request of cabinet members, chief executive or chief officers. Such requests should be made prior to the meeting where possible to allow for the speedy issue of the release immediately after the meeting.

Generally releases giving information on decisions taken should not be issued more than 24 hours after the meeting.

**Individual Members and political groups**

All members are asked to bear in mind their Code of Conduct when responding to media queries.

**Members of Cabinet**

The Leader and Cabinet have prerogative on policy statements. These are generally based on advice from officers including the communications officers. Cabinet members can respond directly to the press about matters relating to their executive responsibilities, always ensuring they represent the policies of the council when speaking on their portfolio areas.

**Individual Members and political groups**

Nothing in this protocol precludes any political group from issuing its own media information through its own channels, or any member from speaking to the press.

Ideally press releases issued by individual groups or members should be copied to the communications team. These will be held in strict confidence and used only to help inform corporate responses to media enquiries.

Where individual members wish to promote a council activity or respond to media coverage relevant to their particular ward, they should liaise with the communications team.

**Political issues**

There are times when an issue becomes ‘political’. In such cases an official council response will not be given but political groups can comment directly. In this case the communications team will pass on the contact numbers for the political group leaders.

**Publicity in election periods**

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, all proactive publicity about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections.

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 member or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted.

Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve members likely to be standing for election.

However, this does not stop the council responding to major events or service enquiries. Members holding key political or civic positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for member level response to an important event outside the authority’s control.

**Correcting inaccurate reporting**

Should a newspaper or broadcaster publish/broadcast something inaccurate about the council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

The communications team scans the media daily to identify inaccurate reports and will alert the relevant officer/member where appropriate.

The issue should be discussed with the communications team to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter to the editor, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice.

Officers should act as the spokesperson on any factual information and the appropriate executive member should be quoted when a comment is required.

In the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can be counter-productive to complain or respond. Each case must be judged individually.

Only in extreme circumstances should you expect to receive a correction or retraction from the media. In most cases it is better to send out a fresh and positive story about the issue.

### **Letters to the editor**

Letters, whether for publication or not, are one way of correcting misinformation printed in a newspaper.

Sometimes however they can be counter-productive, leading to an on-going public debate via the letters’ page. Also the editor will decide when a debate on a topic should end so it is not always possible to get the last word.

If there are serious issues coming from letters’ pages which do need addressing, it is recommended that a press statement be issued to put the record straight.

The communications team is happy to draft a response which would need to be agreed by the portfolio holder and ~~service-Group M~~anager.

All letters to the media sent on behalf of the council must be sent through the communications team unless agreed otherwise.