

## **OFFICERS’ 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 all officers involved in dealing with the media, 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 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.

Officers 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.

The communications team will work with service area communication champions on devising a six-month PR plan. The working document will provide key information about expected newsworthy items, good or bad. At the end of that period the PR plan will be reviewed and a new one drawn up. This does not prevent officers asking the communications team for help on ad-hoc or unplanned issues.

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

The communications team will co-ordinate all media enquiries and arrange appropriate responses. They will prioritise enquiries, source relevant information for enquirers and arrange interviews as necessary.

Officers should not try to handle the media without their help and guidance. Don’t say “no comment” or get into a discussion before you do so. Your ‘off the cuff’ remark could end up in a newspaper.

Simple, factual queries may be dealt with by the communications team without reference to other officers or executive members. If the relevant officer or cabinet member is unable to supply information for a media response within the deadline, the communications team will aim to issue statements which avoid 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 spokesperson, 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.

### **Technical/factual information:**

When providing information of a technical/factual nature (such as planning technicalities, benefits policies) on a topic it is appropriate to use an officer. Where possible, officers who have undergone media training will be used. 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.

**Commenting on an issue:**

Generally the executive member with responsibility for that area will be put forward. If the appropriate member is not available/contactable for interview at the requested time it may be appropriate to use another Cabinet member, the ward member or a council officer.

**If a communications officer contacts you with a media query**

Please 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.

Give the communications officer as much information as possible. If you withhold vital details it 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.

Information for press releases should be submitted to the communications team as soon as possible. Please try to give the communications officer at least two weeks’ notice to prepare it. It cannot be guaranteed that we will be able to publicise particular events if less than two weeks’ notice is given, as this is the time needed to ensure we meet weekly publications’ deadlines, but if you genuinely need something at the last moment a release can usually be drafted quickly, subject to other priorities. Please try to plan your publicity to avoid this, as last minute work is not effective for good media coverage.

You can supply information verbally or by email, using the following guidelines:

- Do not spend time writing the release yourself.
- Notes or bullet points are best.
- Include the basic facts about the story, which answer the questions Who, What, Why, Where, When, How?
- Include sources of additional information and contact numbers.
- Remember not to divulge private or confidential data without permission and authorisation.

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

Approval will be sought only for the factual content of a release. Matters of style, presentation, punctuation, grammar etc are the responsibility of the communications team.

A press release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and the communications team may suggest alternative ways of publicising it.

### **Issuing of joint press releases**

Where a particular event/project is joint funded/managed, media relations responsibility should be agreed beforehand. In general terms, the lead authority will write and issue the press release, clearing it with partners beforehand. It is advisable to give the communications team ample notice on such press releases to allow time for approval of quotes, as where there are a number of partners this may take some time.

### **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. It also allows us to put an issue across in a clear way which

gives the journalist an accurate picture, rather than relying on the journalist’s interpretation of reports.

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.

### **Photo calls**

A good photo can add impact to a story and sometimes even makes the difference between whether it is used by a newspaper or not.

Most publications will not print amateur shots so contact the communications team who will either organise a photo-call with relevant press or organise for a professional photographer to take a photograph. Again please give as much notice as possible.

### **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 councillor 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 sometimes be counter-productive to complain. 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 you won’t always 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 Manager.

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