

Press and Media Protocol / Officer - Member External Communications Protocol

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1. Summary

- 1.1. Communication of Stroud District Council's key objectives and operational matters is crucial to the way the district's residents and businesses, external partners, and media organisations portray the Council.
- 1.2 This protocol has been produced to set down a framework for how communications are handled by officers and members and clarify good practice relating to the effective management of media relations at the Council. It is supplementary to the Protocol on Member and Officer Relations and anticipates that at all times, both parties will endeavour to work together constructively for the good of the Council and District, as 'One Council'.
- 1.3 Not all situations can be covered in detail as much depends on the set of circumstances at any one time, so this protocol is designed to be as flexible as possible whilst setting out a trusted and tested approach.
- 1.4 The protocol applies to all Councillors, Committee Chairs (and committee members), and Council officers who may be contacted by local, regional, national or specialist media, and includes print as well as broadcast media.

2. Legal Framework

- 2.1 All press releases and media engagement on behalf of the Council will:
 - (a) be in accordance with the Council's agreed Media Guidelines
 - (b) be issued or organised only through the Council's Communications Team to ensure the proactive, effective and efficient management of the Council's public image, relations and interface.
 - (c) be concerned only with matters of policy and/or which relate to the Council's functions
 - (d) not contain anything of a political nature. In this respect regard must be given to the relevant legislation concerning publicity issued by local authorities, with particular care around the pre-election period, as summarised below.
- 2.2 Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986 places a prohibition upon the Council that it:

"shall not publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to effect support for a political party.

In determining whether material falls within the prohibition regard shall be had to the content and style of the material, the time and other circumstances of publication and the likely effect on those to whom it is directed and in particular the following matters:

- (e) *Whether the material refers to a political party or to persons identified with a political party or promotes or opposes a point of view on a question of political controversy which is identifiable as the view of one political party and not of another;*
- (f) *Where material is part of a campaign the effect which the campaign appears to be designed to achieve"*

The term 'publicity' is defined in the Act as "*any communication in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or a section of the public*". Local authorities are also required by section 4(1) of the Act to have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contents of in coming to any decision on publicity.

3. The Publicity Code

- 3.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity was last issued in 2011 can be found on the website of the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recommended-code-of-practice-for-local-authority-publicity>
- 3.2 The Publicity Code is grouped into seven principles for local authorities to follow, a Council's publicity should:
 - be lawful
 - be cost-effective
 - be objective
 - be even-handed
 - be appropriate
 - have regard to equality and diversity
 - be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.
- 3.3 The Publicity Code gives recommended practice on a number of aspects of publicity covering subject matter, costs, content, dissemination, advertising, recruitment advertising, publicity about individual members of an authority, timing of publicity, elections, referendums and petitions, and assistance to others for publicity. The principles may be summarised as follows.
- 3.4 The principle of lawfulness is that an authority's publicity should comply with statutory provisions and advises that any paid-for advertising published by a local authority should comply with the Advertising Standards Authority's Advertising Codes.

- 3.5 The principle of cost-effectiveness is that local authorities should be able to confirm that consideration has been given to the value for money that the publicity is achieving, while recognising that in some circumstances this will be difficult to quantify.
- 3.6 The principle of objectivity requires local authority publicity to be politically impartial. The Publicity Code acknowledges that a council has to be able to explain its decisions and justify its policies, but this should not be done in a way that can be perceived as a political statement or a commentary on contentious areas of public policy.
- 3.7 The principle of even-handedness has the effect that local authority publicity can address matters of political controversy in a fair manner and may contain links to other political sites or contain political logos on material hosted for third parties. However, local authorities should ensure that publicity about the Council does not seek to affect support for a single councillor or group. The Publicity Code does, however, recognise that at times it is acceptable to associate publicity with a single member of the Council.
- 3.8 The principle addressing the appropriate use of publicity is that local authorities should refrain from retaining the services of lobbyists, i.e., political professionals whose job it is to bring their client's message to those in a position to influence policy. Appropriate use of publicity is also about the frequency, content, and appearance of council newsletters in order to prevent unfair competition with local newspapers. It sets out that generally the frequency of council newsletters should be no more than quarterly.
- 3.9 The equality and diversity principle is that publicity by local authorities may seek to influence positively the attitudes of local people in relation to matters of health, safety, and other issues where publicity can have a positive influence on the behaviour of the public.
- 3.10 Finally, the principle that local authority publicity should be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity gives guidance as to how local authority publicity should be treated during period of elections and referendums, both national and local.

4. Principles

The aim of this protocol is to ensure that the Council makes the best use of its communications resources to support open, accessible, and responsive communications, whilst acknowledging that council resources may not be used for party political purposes. It clearly sets out the respective roles of all members and officers in dealing with the media.

- 4.1 Adherence to the protocol will ensure consistency of standards, accuracy of information and appropriate political and officer input with a view to protecting and enhancing the reputation of the Council so that it is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the council's approach to the media should be:
- open and honest
 - proactive
 - responsive
 - timely
- 4.2 The ability for the Communications Team to act quickly and decisively depends on it being kept fully up to date and Councillors and officers should ensure issues which will affect the Council's reputation should be brought to the attention of the team as soon as possible. Officers will keep relevant members informed of media interest in the Council's activities, especially regarding strategic or contentious matters.
- 4.3 Officers writing reports for council meetings will inform the Communications Team of potential news items or matters which may attract negative or positive publicity, as early as possible. The Communications Team will likewise ensure that it is aware of events and issues and will keep up to date with pipeline reports in the Forward Plan to identify any potential issues so that they can be dealt with proactively. The Communications Team will consider the timing of releases carefully – issuing press releases when or just after meeting papers are published can help the council drive the narrative of an issue from an early stage, however each case will be decided on its merits. It may be preferable in some cases to issue press releases after meetings as well.
- 4.4 The Communications strategy complies with the following principles:
- To support honest, open, two-way communication
 - To promote and protect the reputation of the Council
 - To regulate the correct use of the corporate identity and style
 - To ensure all publicity is produced in an easy to understand and accessible format and style
 - To practice a proactive and planned approach to media handling and wider communication
 - To provide effective communication support
 - To promote the Council's vision, priorities, and policies
 - To set standards on communicating with hard to reach groups
 - To support effective partnership working through developing communication strategies for joint projects

- 4.5 The Communications team provides advice and support to all directorates and elected members. Its main roles are to manage and maintain relationships and reputation, as well as to promote pro-active publicity on council policy, local authority partnerships, local initiatives / achievements and other issues affecting the Council and the District.
- 4.6 The service should be the first point of contact for all media enquiries and all outgoing publicity or potential promotional opportunities with the press or any other publications. Their expertise and knowledge support elected members and officers to ensure opportunities for proactive positive news are maximised and negativity is mitigated and managed where possible.
- 4.7 No Council press releases or publications should be issued without the involvement of the Communications team. If a member is contacted by, or contacts, the media on an issue, he/she should:
- Seek assistance from the Communications team and/or relevant senior officer(s), except in relation to a statement which is party political in nature
 - Clearly indicate in what capacity he/she is speaking
 - Be sure that they make it clear whether they are speaking in line with agreed council policy or that this is their personal view
 - Be sure of what he/she wants to say or not to say
 - Consider the likely consequences for the Council of his/her statement (e.g. commitment to a particular course of action, image, and allegations / jumping to conclusions)
 - Never give a commitment in relation to matters which may be subject to claims from third parties and/or are likely to be an insurance matter
 - Consider whether to consult other relevant members
 - Take particular care in what he/she says in the run-up to local or national elections to avoid giving the impression of electioneering, unless he/she has been contacted as an election candidate or political party activist – in these circumstances, no Council resources may be used.
- 4.8 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 Relations

The Council values the media as one of its key partners in communication and aims to forge strong professional links with local, regional, and national media. It is committed to being transparent and maintaining a positive working relationship with media and respects the right of the media to report on any given topic.

- 5.1 Providing a professional information service to the media is a key responsibility for the Council and it takes a proactive approach to working with the media wherever possible. In order to maintain a good long-term relationship, the Communications team needs to be trusted by the media and the wider community and will never knowingly provide inaccurate or incorrect information.
- 5.2 The way in which the Council is portrayed in the media has a major influence on how it is perceived, and every opportunity should be taken to publicise the council's services, decisions, policies, and initiatives.
- 5.3 One of the most important aspects of dealing with and managing media is being able to provide a prompt response to a query, question, or interview request. The sooner the Council can respond and involve itself in the story, the greater the chance it has to influence it. This is especially important where the Council's reputation might be affected.
- 5.4 All Councillors and officers should support the Communications team in responding to media enquiries in a timescale that meets journalistic deadlines where possible. If the Council fails to reply in time there is a risk that the journalist may source their story elsewhere or record a 'no comment' response, which may not be in the Council's interests.

6. Processes

Media Enquiry

The Communications Team receives a significant number of inquiries from local, national, and international TV, radio, newspaper and news website organisations. All media enquiries should be referred to the Communications team in the first instance. This enables the service to make a judgement about how an enquiry should be answered and by whom. The response can often be handled with a written statement prepared by the Communications team in conjunction with relevant officers.

- 6.1 Responding to media enquiries can be time-consuming and often, responses are requested within a short timeframe. The Communications Team will

manage these requests and establish realistic response times in conjunction with officers, members and the media organisations concerned. At all times, the Communications Team will seek to protect and enhance the council's reputation.

- 6.2 When an inquiry is received, the Communications Team will ask the most appropriate officer for the information required and formulate a response. The normal response will be attributed to an 'SDC spokesperson' or relevant committee chair if they wish, however there may be occasions when a deadline must be met, and an 'SDC spokesperson' will be quoted. The response will be approved by the relevant Service Head, before the Chief Executive and relevant Strategic Director(s), relevant ward members, committee chairs and Administration Group Leaders are informed.
- 6.3 The vast majority of council publicity will include a written quote or interview, which can help to make the content more interesting and provide an authoritative voice on the subject matter. In certain cases, where a press release or statement is simply to provide a brief announcement or notice, this may not be necessary.
- 6.4 We will also work to influence the news agenda proactively by offering people for interview or providing case studies to illustrate topical issues. We will use our forward planning process to identify opportunities in advance but may still want/have to exploit on-the-day stories particularly when there is breaking news or developing stories.
- 6.5 It is important that quotes are attributed to an individual as this demonstrates responsibility and counters perceptions that the council is a faceless and unaccountable organisation.
- 6.6 The Leader, Deputy-Leader and Committee Chairs will normally act as spokespersons for the Council in responding to the press and media and making public statements on behalf of the Council. If there is an issue of cross party importance, they may invite the Group Leader of the largest opposition group to become involved.
- 6.7 Members and senior officers will liaise with the Communications team on all forms of contact with the press and media and approve any press releases.
- 6.8 When a press release has been approved by a Service Head and relevant members, Group Leaders, relevant Strategic Directors, and the Chief Executive will be sent a copy before publication, for information only. Each press release should reference the relevant CDP priorities it is aligned with where possible.

- 6.9 Where a matter has significant implications for policy or the reputation of the Council, the Leader and in his / her absence, the Deputy Leader of the Council will be contacted as a matter of course.
- 6.10 Quotes on any specific operational issues which requires technical or in-depth knowledge to articulate will be attributed to officers. Officers will be quoted in circumstances where a member of the public would reasonably expect an operational, officer perspective. Communications staff will advise with recommendations. These situations will be such as when:
- there is a need to respond extremely quickly in changing circumstances to maintain the flow of information to the public (e.g. an emergency road closure or an environmental health investigation);
 - specific technical information is being explained
 - there is a legal aspect to the comment which would benefit from attribution to a professional officer rather than a politician.
- 6.11 Where the appropriate responsible Committee Chair or Vice-Chair is unavailable within media deadlines, and therefore unable to approve comment that would otherwise be attributable to him/her, the Leader of the Council will be quoted or an alternative suitable responsible councillor.
- 6.12 In the event of neither an appropriate Committee Chair/ Vice-Chair nor the Leader or Deputy Leader of the Council being available, an appropriate responsible officer will approve the quote. Quotes, comments and statements will reflect the factual representation of the Council's or Committee's decisions, and not that of the individual and/or political party views.

7. Proactive Media Approach

Positive media coverage supports the reputation of the Council. When issuing proactive media, all content will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted, and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts, and include an approved quotation from the appropriate Councillor/ Committee Chair.

- 7.1 All official council news/press releases will be placed on the council's website within one working day of issue wherever possible.
- 7.2 From time to time the Council must respond proactively to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully to limit the potential for negative publicity.

- 7.3 Members and officers must alert the Communications and Marketing team as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest comes to light. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.
- 7.4 Members and officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the council about an issue.
- 7.5 When preparing a response, the following strategy will be followed:
- where the council has made a substantial mistake, it will explain what went wrong and what it is doing to put it right. It will not be defensive but take the attitude that it can learn from its mistakes.
 - where the media has made a substantial mistake in reporting the activities of the Council it will quickly and assertively explain the mistake to the media and seek a right of reply
- 7.6 Should the media publish / broadcast an inaccuracy relating to Council business, policy or process, a quick decision will be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue will be discussed with the appropriate Committee Chair and Chief Officer and a plan of action agreed. 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. Each case must be judged individually.
- 7.7 Members of the media are welcome to attend live streamed Council and Committee meetings. During the 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.

8. Process for dealing with interview requests

Occasionally, requests for interviews are received by media organisations. Group Leaders, Committee Chairs the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors will be asked by the Communications Team if they wish to be interviewed, and a pre-interview briefing can be supplied on request. Media training will be offered to all members and senior officers to assist with this.

- 8.1 Members will inform the Communications Team if they have been approached by the media for comment. For party political matters, informing the Communications Team will suffice. For matters concerning the Council's

operation and/or strategic aims, a statement will be agreed in the same way as a press statement (above).

- 8.2 The Communications Team will make every effort to ensure that officers and members are informed before they are exposed to significant issues through the media. However, in an increasingly fast and pervasive communications environment, particularly given the speed and ease of dissemination on social media this will not always be possible.

9. Process for making social media posts

The Council has several active social media channels which are used to promote operational matters, and strategic objectives which have been agreed by the Administration in the CDP. The Communications Team will post engaging content with pictures or video – members who share this content can help maximise its reach and effect, as representatives of their communities and the Council. This is also consistent with the ‘One Council’ approach.

- 9.1 Council social media accounts will not be started by members of staff without approval from the Communications Manager, and training in social media best practice can be provided in-house on request.

10. Publicity in Election Periods

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 or national elections. During this period Council publicity should not ordinarily 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, in accordance with the guidelines in this protocol.

11. Grant Awards

The Council awards grants to local groups and organisations via a number of schemes for the benefit of our communities. As such, recipients should acknowledge these grants appropriately and regularly. When grants are awarded, the Council will publish a press release and social media content tagging recipients, recipients will be reminded to include a short message on their website, email signatures and press releases, and ask the Council to contribute to press releases about schemes which have benefitted from Council grant funds.