

Handling media enquiries

- Corporate Communications will co-ordinate all media enquiries and arrange appropriate responses to them. They will prioritise enquiries, decide if a political response is required, source relevant information for enquirers, arrange interviews and act as corporate spokespeople where appropriate.
- Officers who are directly approached by a member of the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves; instead they should refer the journalist to Corporate Communications who will manage the response.
- Members who are directly approached by a member of the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol. In particular, Cabinet Members should be careful to ensure they represent the policies of the District Council when speaking on their own Portfolio areas.
- Simple, factual queries will be dealt with by Corporate Communications without reference to other Officers or Cabinet Members.
- Where enquiries are covered substantially by pre-agreed lines, Corporate Communications need not seek clearance from Heads of Service or Members before responding to them.
- When seeking a response to an enquiry, Corporate Communication will advise Officers and Members of journalists' deadlines and, where appropriate, of the consequences of not meeting those deadlines.

- If the relevant Officer or Member is unable to supply information for a response to a media enquiry within the journalist's stated deadline, Corporate Communications will issue statements which avoid detail but which seek to protect the District Council – for example: 'The matter will be investigated'. This should also apply in extreme circumstances when Corporate Communications cannot be contacted, for example, if there is an emergency situation out of hours and Corporate Communications staff have not yet arrived at the scene.
- The District Council will not normally comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff.
- In all other circumstances the phrase 'no comment' will not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

Interviews

- Any Officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to Corporate Communications.
- In the event of the District Council's emergency plan being activated, Corporate Communications can be contacted using the out of hours contacts included in the emergency plan.
- 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. However, this will only be arranged with the permission of the relevant Head of Service and 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 District Council's approved and agreed policies.
- **Commenting on an issue:** Generally the Cabinet Portfolio Holder 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 an Officer
- Where it would be appropriate for the interviewee to be one of the political leaders, it will be for the groups to decide between themselves who is prepared to do the interview.

The Cabinet

- While each Cabinet member has their own portfolio, they share collective responsibility for representing the views of The Cabinet. When speaking on their own specific portfolio area Cabinet members have a responsibility to represent the policies of the authority.
- Information relating to Cabinet reports will be embargoed until publication of the papers.

Individual councillors and political groups

- The national code states ‘Publicity about individual Councillors may include the contact details, the position they hold in the Council and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual Councillor’s proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and while it may acknowledge the part played by individual councillors as holders of particular positions in the District Council, personalisation of issues or personal image making should, be avoided.’
- It is made clear that any publicity put out by the District Council should not be, or be liable to misrepresentation as being, party political.
- However nothing in this protocol precludes any political group issuing its own media information through its own channels.
- All news releases issued by individual groups or members must be copied to Corporate Communications. These releases will be held in strict confidence and used only to inform responses to media enquiries.
- Corporate Communications will provide non-party political communications advice to all Councillors on request but will not produce press releases for members on individual ward or party-political issues or in advance of a decision of a properly constituted councillor meeting.

Political issues

- There are times when an issue becomes ‘political’. In such cases an official District Council response will not be given but political groups can comment directly.

Contacts

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