

# Media Protocol



## **Terms used in the Protocol**

- The Media – refers to those who communicate news to the public or to a professional audience, whether through print, radio, TV, internet or social media.
- The Press Office - refers to the Corporate Communications Manager who works on media issues.
- Quote – a comment included in a press release or press statement that is written in speech marks and is attributed to one individual.
- Officers - refers to all employees of the Council.

**This protocol is governed by provisions in the Local Government Act and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. All publicity (including work with the media) produced by Stratford-on-Avon District Council must adhere to the provisions of this Act and these codes.**

## **Introduction**

### **Stratford-on-Avon District's Media Policy**

It has been and will continue to be the policy of Stratford-on-Avon District Council to be open, honest, and accurate in dealing with the media and to respond to enquiries within reporters' deadlines as far as is possible. However, trust and accuracy will not be compromised by their demands. Other than in very exceptional circumstances the District Council will not respond to media enquiries with a 'no comment' statement.

### **Principles of Stratford-on-Avon District's relationship with the media**

The District Council is committed to effective communications so that residents of the District are well informed about District Council services, the reasons for decisions and the role they can play in shaping future developments.

The District Council will use the media as one of a number of ways of communicating with its stakeholders.

### **General protocols for working with the media**

- All press releases and statements will refer to 'Stratford-on-Avon District Council' reinforcing the non-negotiable to act as one Council.
- Wherever possible, a named individual will be quoted in the release. When quoting an officer we will give their job title. When quoting a Member we will give their area of responsibility (eg Portfolio Holder). Anyone who is quoted will be made aware of the fact and will agree the content of that quote. In exceptional circumstances the Press Officer will clear a release and/or quote on behalf of an officer.

- Those involved in major projects or initiatives must develop a media/communications plan agreed with Corporate Communications.
- All Officers/Members likely to be involved on a regular basis with the media will undergo media training.

## **Risk assessment**

Without a clearly established protocol for the way in which the District Council works proactively and reactively with the media there is a significant risk of:

- Negative publicity – resulting from slow or non-responses to enquiries.
- Lost opportunity for good news stories – resulting from a lack of press releases and other proactive work.
- Lack of understanding about the Council's role and work – resulting from poorly briefed journalists.
- Concerns amongst staff about comments they have made to the press – as a result of well intentioned, but poorly prepared reactions to difficult media enquiries.
- No perception within the media of the Council as a single organisation – resulting from 'departmental' views of services and issues.
- Disillusioned staff – resulting from negative stories appearing in the media before they have been briefed.

## Proactive work with the media

### Press Releases

Press Releases should inform and raise awareness about Council services and functions, explain reasons for particular policies and priorities, and improve local accountability. As such they need to catch the attention of the media and ensure good positive coverage about the Council.

### Generating SDC press releases

Information for press releases will come from two sources:

- The Member decision making system
- Officers

### The Member decision making system

The Press Office can issue press releases following Cabinet and Full Council meetings as a way of confirming decisions made at those meetings. Any quotes will reflect the approved policy of the District Council and not the personal views of a particular political party.

The Press Office may issue releases in advance of decision-making meetings alerting the media to agenda items. In these cases, press releases act as advisory notices and will not contain quotes.

Under the Local Govt Act 2000 the additional powers of well-being and community leadership mean that the Council can legitimately become involved in and comment on issues which may be outside its own area of direct responsibility but have an impact on the community. The Press Office will work closely with the Leader on these matters to agree what should be issued to the media.

### Officers

Officers will be expected to request the Press Office to issue releases about service improvements, events, consultation initiatives, work in progress and achievements. However, the Press Office will require clearance of any such releases by the relevant Portfolio Holder or a Head of Service.

## Compiling press releases

The Press Office can receive information for press releases in the following ways:

- **Bullet point information** - explaining the what, when, where, why, who, how of the required content, the preferred timing of the release, how the Press Office can get further information and who will be the spokesperson should there be any subsequent broadcast media interest.
- **Fully written releases** – these do not have to be formatted (the Press Office will take responsibility for the final layout of the release). Please note that the Press Office may contact the originator to discuss changes to the content of the release, to ensure consistency of style and message and to ensure that the release is contributing to the Council's overall key messages.

The Press Office will use a '*Notes to Editors*' facility at the bottom of press releases to provide background information on either the content of the release or the service area that the release relates to. This is a useful tool for increasing understanding of the District Council's services.

The contact details given on the release will be the lead officer and the Press Office's. In the accompanying email it may be appropriate to add further contact details for example the Portfolio Holder for further quotes or a representative from a partner organisation.

As embargoes are not legally enforceable they will rarely be used.

The news releases for Neighbourhood Development Plans follow an agreed set template with Planning Policy resulting in a total of five news releases issued for each Neighbourhood Development Plan:

- Stage one – Application for the designation of the Neighbourhood Area
- Stage two – Draft plan for consultation
- Stage three – Notification of Referendum
- Stage four – Referendum result
- Stage five – Neighbourhood Development Plan adopted by Full Council, this also includes a quote from the Portfolio Holder

All releases will contain a reference number and a log will be held by the Press Office.

All releases will be approved prior to issue by the relevant Officer, Head of Service and Portfolio Holder as appropriate.

## **Issuing press release**

The Press Office will issue all District Council press releases.

Releases will be emailed (blind copied) to all of the following as appropriate:

- all local & regional newspapers
- Municipal Journal and LGC
- local and regional broadcast media and
- local and regional news agencies.

In addition, and if requested, press releases can also be sent to:

- national newspapers
- professional, trade journals.

There may be circumstances where it is deemed appropriate to issue a different release to some media, for example we may deal with the content of a press release differently to interest the business press.

All press releases will be placed on the website, the News Blog on the intranet and posted on social media accounts (X and Facebook).

A link will be sent to all Cabinet members of all issued SDC news releases via email.

## **Issuing press releases following Court Proceedings**

The Press Office will ensure that all press releases relating to court proceedings do not expose the District Council to legal challenge by adhering to the following:

- Under the Contempt of Court Act, publication of Court proceedings should be accurate and contemporaneous in order to retain privilege (the right to report proceedings without legal challenge).
- Press releases should be sent out on the day of the court case, the day after or at the very latest, the day after that. The release should contain the date of the court case to make it clear when it took place. The onus is then on the media receiving the release to ensure contemporaneous publication. The later the publication of information in a press release, the less safe it is and the more likely it is to lose privilege.
- Information in the press release should be restricted only to information read out in open court. Submitted evidence not read out in open court should not be referred to.
- Information in the press release should be based on fact only ie the full name, age and address of the defendant, the charges faced by the defendant, plea, admittance, or conviction. Evidence submitted should be referred to as allegations. Evidence withdrawn or not offered should not be referred to.
- Once an appeal has been lodged, there are restrictions on what can be published. Only the basest of information can be given ie name of defendant, conviction, and the fact that an appeal has been lodged. This is to avoid prejudicing a future hearing. Any such release will be checked with our Legal team.
- Court Case press releases will be checked with a member of the District Council's Legal team by the Press Office before publication to ensure factual accuracy.



## **Planning Enforcement monthly updates**

The Planning Enforcement service produce monthly updates on the service area with details of the various actions taken or notices issued – this is posted on the News section of the website and posted on social media.

## **Planning Committee meeting results**

The results of the Planning Committee meeting decisions will be posted on the News section of the website and social media the following day after the Committee or as soon as Planning Admin send through.

## **Partnership releases**

Where releases are issued in partnership with another body or company, they can contain quotes and content agreed by both parties. The Press Office requests that it is alerted to the need for partnership releases in good time due to the complexity of needing to obtain clearance from two or more partners.

## **Third party / contractor releases**

Where releases are generated from other organisations such as contractors some will request a Portfolio Holder comment to be included in their release and the Press Officer will work with the relevant Portfolio Holder to draft an appropriate quote to be included. On other occasions it won't be appropriate to include a Portfolio Holder quote, but the information will be shared on the News section of the website and shared on social media.

## **Use of photographs**

Where a release relates to a subject or initiative that can be photographed, the release will state that there is a 'photo opportunity'. If we already have a quality electronic image it will be emailed with the release and asked to be credited to Stratford-on-Avon District Council. The Design Team will maintain an up-to-date collection of Officer and Member photographs which can be supplied to the media on request.

## **Follow-up to press releases**

Press releases are designed to alert the media to a good news or information item and to attract them through positive stories. They cannot always provide comprehensive information about a subject and may only be able to highlight the basic points about an issue sufficient to raise a journalist's interest. Therefore it is likely that releases will result in follow-up enquiries, from the print media for additional or background information or for clarification; and from the broadcast media for interviews and filming opportunities. Officers and Members should therefore be prepared to make themselves (or a nominated person) available to ensure that the opportunity for publicity and promotion for the District Council is not lost.

Journalists should contact the Press Office for further information. If Officers are contacted directly they should refer calls to the Press Office, where a decision will be made as to the best course of action.

The Press Office will put the most appropriate person up for interview (ie the relevant Member or officer) not the press officer. The Press Office will always provide a briefing for an individual undertaking an interview if they so wish and will always accompany an officer if they are to be filmed, if at all possible.

Whenever a journalist or photographer is on District Council premises he/she will be escorted at all times.

Filming or photographing of children must not be undertaken without parental permission and the relevant consent forms.

Filming of adults on District Council premises should only be done with their permission – this includes employees of the District Council.

## **Media briefings**

The use of media briefings is encouraged where significant issues are likely to be complex and controversial. A member of the Press Office will always be present together with the appropriate officers/Members. Briefings will be offered to all the local media contacts.

## **Press conferences**

Press conferences will be used when an issue is likely to generate significant media interest. Conferences allow us to deal with considerable numbers of media enquiries in an efficient way.

Press conferences will be chaired by the relevant Head of Service or the Press Officer who will introduce the panel and control the question and answer session.

The Chairman of the panel and in some cases other members of the panel will read a short, prepared statement before journalists are invited to ask questions.

## **Outcomes of the proactive media protocol**

- Press releases will be issued in a timely fashion – the Press Office will judge the best time and day to issue releases based on the volume and nature of releases being issued that week, and the deadlines of the media.
- Press releases will work in harmony with one another and will not result in contradictory messages.
- No one media outlet will be favoured over another.
- The Press Office will keep a central record of the Council's press releases and make all of them available electronically.

## Reactive work with the media

### Media enquiries

In its reactive role, the Press Office will work closely with Officers and Members to ensure an accurate response to requests for information and comment and to ensure that the Council does not lose its right of reply.

### Dealing with media enquiries

All media enquiries must come through the Press Office which operates a 24-hour service. Any journalist contacting an Officer by phone or email must be passed to the Press Office.

Members will be contacted by journalists direct and are at liberty to comment without reference to the Press Office; however, Cabinet Members should discuss any responses with their Head of Service before giving a response.

All media enquiries will be noted, and information gained for a response from the relevant Officer. In some cases the Press Officer will respond directly based on prior knowledge of the issue. The majority of responses to media enquiries will be by telephone or email. Where appropriate the response, or part of the response, will be in the form of a quote from a named individual.

There will be occasions when the Press Officer deems it preferable for an Officer to speak directly to a journalist to avoid the need for a very long and complex written response. Only the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Heads of Service and Service Managers (if appropriate) will be asked by the Press Office to speak to journalists who have a media enquiry. The Officer should then inform the Press Office of the information shared with the journalist so that it can be logged and checked once the story is printed.

Most Planning Enforcement media enquires will generate a response as follows: 'As there is a live enforcement case on this site, the District Council is unable to make any comment on this at this time.'

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 will enable journalists to submit requests in writing for any information held. These written requests can be sent to any Officer within the District Council. They should be logged and dealt with according to the District Council's own FOI process.

## **Confidentiality**

The confidentiality of staff and clients will be maintained. Although we will not issue a 'no comment' response, we will at times issue a statement saying 'we do not discuss confidential matters'. However, it is usually possible to provide some general information about District Council policy and practice to add to this response. Information about individuals will only be given to correct an inaccurate assumption or statement or when the individual gives their permission.

When asked about issues that also affect other organisations, the Press Office will liaise with the relevant body, for example the Police, to agree a response.

## **Early warnings**

All officers are requested to advise the Press Office of any potential negative media stories as soon as possible.

## **Letters**

All letters to newspapers in response to articles or readers' letters, should be cleared through the Press Office. On occasions it may be deemed appropriate for the relevant Portfolio Holder to write a written response.

## Outcomes of the reactive media protocol

- The Press Office will maintain a record of all media enquiries and responses.
- Officers will be freed from the pressure of having to give unprepared statements to journalists.
- The same statement will be used to deal with enquiries from a variety of sources relating to the same issue so avoiding duplication of effort and inconsistencies in messages.
- The likelihood of misinformation and libellous statements being issued, and the chance of confidential information being released are reduced.
- Early preparation on potentially negative media stories will reduce the instances of negative/inaccurate reporting and ensure we are able to meet a journalist's deadline.
- The image of a confident, responsive, professional Council is built with the media.

### Monitoring media coverage

The Press Office will monitor the coverage the District Council receives in the local and local government media and where possible in the national media as well as social media. Where possible email links to media coverage and copies of the articles will be circulated.

### Reviewing the media protocol

The Corporate Communications Manager will monitor the effectiveness of this media protocol in association with the Chief Executive and reviewed annually.

## Elections

The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.

Publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals, or recommendations in such a way that identifies them with individual members or groups of members. However, it is acceptable for the District Council to respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided that their answers are factual and not party political.

Members holding key political positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the authority's control.

Proactive events should not be arranged in this period but if there are events these should not involve members likely to be standing for election. A separate note about the pre-election period will be issued to Members and Officers in the run up to the election.

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