

CHESTERFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

Media protocol

Summary

1. **Importance of media relations:** The vast majority of people form their opinions of the council based on coverage in the media. This inevitably has a big impact on our overall reputation. The media also inform people about events and activities. So it is important that we are open, transparent and clear in our communication with them.
2. **The media we deal with:** The media world has undergone dramatic changes in the past 10 years. In addition to more established forms of media (eg Derbyshire Times, Peak FM, BBC Radio Sheffield) we now respond to bloggers, hyper local online news sites (eg Chesterfield Post) and newsletters (eg Twist). However, even the more traditional media have changed and all these organisations are increasingly focused on online, video and social media activities rather than paper based communication.
3. **Media calls** - All media calls should be referred to the communications and marketing service on (01246) 345250 or 345245 or mobiles 07964 921563 or 07964 921452.

If you cannot contact the communications and marketing service immediately then find out from the journalist:

- their name
- the media organisation they are from
- what question(s) they want answered
- what their deadline is and
- how they can be contacted.

Then pass this on to the communications and marketing service as soon as someone is available. If the deadline is urgent and nobody is available then the query should be passed to the chief executive or the executive directors.

4. **Talking to the media:** The communications and marketing service will decide the most appropriate person to talk to the media. This will normally be:

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- The council leader or deputy leader (who can speak about any council issue)
- Other cabinet members (speaking on issues within their portfolio area)
- Communications or marketing officers

But there will be times where it will also be:

- Mayor (for civic issues)
- Chief executive or executive directors

However, in the event of these people being unavailable or technical information being sought the communications and marketing service may ask other officers (usually managers) to speak to the media and advise them on how best to do this.

5. **Never say 'no comment'**: We will never say 'no comment' to a media story. A response will always be given, even if this is a 'holding statement' until further information is available.
6. **Social media**: Much of today's news in traditional media now originates from posts or comments on social media. Be aware that what you say on social media in either a work or personal capacity (if you are doing it in a public forum or a group) could be taken by the media as a comment they can quote. If in doubt, seek advice but work on the basis that you shouldn't say anything that you would not be prepared to say in a public meeting. See the social media policy.
7. **Responding to letters in the media**: Staff wishing to respond to letters in the media should consult with the communications and marketing service before submitting letters for publication. This will ensure there is no duplication of response or conflict with any other PR work taking place.
8. **Run-up to elections – the Purdah period**: Special rules apply in the run-up to elections about what publicity can be issued. Guidance will be issued prior to this period telling staff and councillors what to do.

Media protocol (full length version).

Why good media relations is important

The Are You Being Served? resident survey (Sept/Oct 2013) shows that residents' main source of information about Chesterfield Borough Council is through local newspapers. The fifth most popular route is through local radio and the ninth through local TV, with online forums and news sites also growing in importance.

This information backs up national research which says the local media remains a key influencer of public perceptions of their council – often negatively.

Effective media relations help to raise the council's profile and celebrate its achievements - and also help to limit the damage from bad news stories.

The actions we take as a council, combined with how well we manage our media relations, will largely determine the council's reputation.

This can only be achieved by thinking through the way the media will respond to intended actions or communications **before** we begin them. If we don't do this we will end up being reactive and dealing with the inevitable fallout, with little chance to influence public opinion.

Principles

- Any information or comment given on behalf of the council should be objective, balanced, informative, accurate and timely.
- We will take a pro-active approach to dealing with the media so that we can promote greater understanding of the council's policies, decisions, functions and responsibilities.
- We shall be open and honest with the media. Criticism is not a reason to be defensive with the media. There are many things we do that some people will not like, often because they have not

been fully informed or because they have different opinions on a subjective matter.

- We will celebrate the council's achievements
- While council publicity must promote council services, policies and actions in a non-political way there is nothing in this protocol that stops any political group from issuing its own information and making any other arrangements for media coverage, using its own resources (subject to a member's individual duties under the code of conduct).

The role of the communications and marketing service

The council's public relations officer and communications and marketing manager have the primary roles to communicate with the local community through the media.

They will seek to provide consistent messages and build relationships in order to work effectively with the media. The media will, rightly, challenge certain decisions made by councillors and officers of the council, and good communication will ensure that council policies and decisions are clearly presented.

The communications and marketing service will decide:

- what is contained in a press release, statement or other pro-active communication (eg social media message)
- who is the relevant spokesperson and
- who is invited to attend photo calls on each piece of news

The communications and marketing service also provides non-party political communications advice to members on request.

Pro-active communications (eg press releases, social media posts, website copy) to the media

Advice on the most effective way of pro-actively communicating with the media should be sought from the communications and marketing service, who will take the decision on how best to do it.

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Traditionally this has been done through press releases, statements and letters but increasingly it is now also done through social media, websites, video or audio.

All members and officers, particularly senior managers, should alert the communications and marketing service to potential newsworthy items (new initiatives, progress reports, key milestones in projects, success in everyday jobs etc) or issues that may spark media interest, whether positive or potentially negative.

However, the decision about which issues warrant publicising, and the best method of doing that, rests with the communications and marketing service.

When alerting the communications and marketing service about pro-active publicity remember that time is an essential factor. Old news is not considered newsworthy and that is why both members and officers should ensure as much notice as possible is given to the communications and marketing service.

Press releases or other pro-active communications will be prepared by the communications and marketing service using information supplied by services. They will always quote the relevant cabinet member except in the run up to an election (the Purdah period). If they are not available, the council leader, will be quoted.

When providing information for proposed pro-active communication remember five key questions that will need answering:

- **Who** is involved?
- **What** is happening?
- **When** is it happening?
- **Where** is it happening?
- **Why** is it happening?

All communication must be written in plain English, free of 'council jargon', and in a style used by the media. This style is different to that which some staff or members will have learnt at school and/or university (eg using lower case rather than capitals for titles, using very short sentences with limited punctuation). This is done for a reason – to

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ensure we are providing information in the format the media wants it without them having to re-write it.

In all communication we do officers must keep in mind the requirement to comply with equalities and data protection legislation and our own policies and guidelines on this.

Social media has changed the abilities of councils to centrally control messages. Individual services are now encouraged to have their own social media feeds and to keep them up-to-date with relevant and engaging content. By default this means that it is impossible for all messages to be agreed centrally. This makes it crucial for staff to follow the social media policy and only comment on information that is in the public arena. Only the communications and marketing service, cabinet members or the chief executive should announce policy decisions on social media.

Pro-active communications, particularly social media posts and press releases, are time sensitive.

Speed of approval

By their very nature decisions on what to say will need to be taken quickly in order to meet deadlines. This requires all staff and members to treat approval of media information as a high priority issue as information may have to be released without checking if delays occur.

Press releases will be sent to appropriate staff (usually the officer that has given the information and, where it is not the same person, the manager for that service) to check it is factually correct and also to the relevant cabinet member or chair of committee.

All members will receive copies of the press release at the time of release and it will appear on the council's website and social media shortly afterwards.

All requests from the media for a story/comment about a press release should go through the communications and marketing service. All comments back to the media are generally made by the communications and marketing service or relevant cabinet member, usually in consultation with the appropriate officer.

If the matter is controversial, and if time permits, the comments should be cleared by the relevant cabinet member or the leader.

Photo calls

Relevant members and officers will be invited to photo opportunities as they arise.

Photos will normally feature the relevant cabinet member and/or the leader or deputy leader. Where the mayor is performing a civic duty they will also normally be included.

Separate pictures featuring staff will also usually be taken for inclusion in the Borough Bulletin staff newsletter.

Political parties are welcome to take their own photos at such events provided these photos are not taken by council staff, don't use council equipment and do not feature staff in them.

Formal meetings of committees, cabinet or full council

Agendas and non confidential reports are available to the media in advance through the council's website.

Where appropriate, press releases will be issued following the meeting describing the decision and quoting the relevant cabinet member.

Motions and questions from individual councillors will not be publicised through press releases, although any decisions taken by the council as a result will.

The communications and marketing service will respond to any subsequent press enquiries by providing a factual explanation at officer level. Where a matter of policy is in question, the matter will be referred to the relevant member.

Where a reporter wishes to find out what was said by individual councillors during a debate, officers will refer the reporter to that councillor.

At key meetings live social media posts will be made to give the public a 'real time' report on proceedings as part of the council's commitment to transparency and increasing engagement.

The media, in all its forms, are also welcome to film or record proceedings of public meetings, although they are asked to notify the council in advance if they plan to do this so that a location can be found where they can do it without interrupting proceedings.

Ward councillors

The communications and marketing service is happy to advise ward councillors who are approached directly by the media for comment/interview, although cannot be used as a political resource. Equally it can advise on different ways and techniques of communicating with constituents eg blogs, social media, newsletters.

The Statutory Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity is clear that council publicity must not be designed to affect public support for a particular councillor. It does allow local authorities to publicise the work of individual members of the council, but says that publicity must make it clear if any views expressed by, or attributed to, individual councillors do not reflect the views of the council.

For this reason publicity will normally be led by the relevant cabinet member, the council leader or deputy leader, or the mayor, to ensure it reflects the agreed position of the council. However, the contribution of individual councillors towards a particular project can also be reflected.

Reactive publicity

Handling a media enquiry

The media are asked to contact the communications and marketing service as the council's first point of contact on media enquiries.

Any staff receiving a media enquiry should immediately pass it on to the communications and marketing service and should not talk to the media without the communications and marketing service knowing **beforehand**.

The reasons for this are:

- to keep a record of enquiries
- to prevent different officers responding to the same issue and
- to protect officers from feeling pressured into making 'off the cuff' remarks

Upon receiving an enquiry, the communications and marketing service will contact the relevant officer(s) and cabinet member(s). The communications and marketing service will then formulate a response and, where time permits, check this with the officer(s) and cabinet member(s) before distribution to the media.

The only exception to this is if an arts journalist contacts the council wanting press tickets or information about theatre shows. These queries will be dealt with by the theatres marketing team. However, media questions about the theatres or any issues involving theatre staff will still be handled by the communications and marketing service.

Talking to the media – media enquiries and interview requests

The council welcomes the opportunity to talk with the media.

We will never say 'no comment' to a media question, even if it means giving a holding response until further facts are known.

The following people are authorised to communicate with the media on behalf of the council:

- Communications and marketing manager and the public relations officer
- The leader and deputy leader (on any subject)
- Executive cabinet members or, in their absence, their assistants (on issues within their portfolio)
- Chairs of scrutiny forums and committees (on issues relating to their committee or forum)
- The mayor/deputy mayor (on civic issues)
- The chief executive, executive directors and chief finance officer.

Interviews should be given by the relevant cabinet member unless they are not available or the information being requested is so technical that only an officer could answer it.

In this scenario this will be confirmed with the relevant cabinet member and the communications and marketing service may ask an officer to speak to the media and provide advice on how to do this. This will usually be a manager or a member of the communications and marketing service but, on occasions, may be other staff.

In an emergency situation the leader and/or the chief executive will be the designated spokespeople (as set out in the council's emergency plan), supported by the communications and marketing manager.

Letters to the press

There may be times when the press publish stories about the council that are inaccurate or misleading. Members and staff wishing to respond in writing to correct these inaccuracies should consult the communications and marketing service before submitting letters for publication. This will ensure that there is no duplication of response.

Councillors or political groups are free to write letters to the media. Councillors should, however, make it clear to the media whether they are speaking:

- (a) officially on behalf of the council - in this case the communications and marketing service should be consulted beforehand; or
- (b) officially on behalf of their particular political group (stating the name of that political group); or
- (c) personally as a ward councillor or personally as a borough councillor.

This protocol does not seek to prevent councillors and their parties from engaging in party political argument and debate between themselves through the media. However the continuation of a long exchange of letters needs to be considered carefully, as it can have a detrimental effect on the council's image and reputation.

Other issues to consider

1. Defamation - libel and slander

Staff and members should be aware of the dangers of defamation in the context of media relations.

The reporting of council, cabinet, scrutiny and committee meetings, and properly constituted public meetings, enjoy qualified privilege. This means, providing they are fair and accurate and published without malice, the media can freely report statements that might otherwise be regarded as defamatory. This does **not** apply to quotes from a member or officer **before or after** the meeting.

News releases issued on behalf of the council also enjoy a form of qualified privilege. In normal circumstances this applies to the publication of a fair and accurate summary of our releases.

Again, what you say in an interview as a follow up to your release enjoys no such privilege from the laws of defamation.

Please also note that the media is sometimes loath to run corrections/apologies. This is not always because they are being difficult. It is often because an apology could be argued as confirmation they have previously published defamatory material and could land them in deeper legal trouble than not issuing an apology at all.

2. Guidelines specific to election periods

Many of the provisions of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, which apply at all times, increase in importance before any election – during what is known as the Purdah period.

At this time it is even more critical that any publicity is objective, balanced, informative and accurate, concentrating on facts, explanations or both.

Advice will be given to officers and members at the appropriate times about what to do.

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It is important to note that the Purdah period does not mean all publicity must stop.

However, it is critical that nothing goes out which in any way could be seen to be political or to promote the interests of any political party. This includes anything that involves related political figures (eg MPs or prospective MPs), as well as any councillors standing for re-election or external candidates standing for election.