

Media Protocol

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the council dealing with the media and the production of external publications (those that go to a non-council audience) and internal publications (those sent to staff).
- 1.2 The council receives around 1,500 enquiries from the media each year and issues around 700 press releases. It also organises photo opportunities, media briefings, radio and TV interviews, and produces a range of internal and external publications in both electronic and paper form.
- 1.3 To ensure all this activities is co-ordinated and managed effectively it is important that it is channelled through a central point – the council's Communications & Media team.
- 1.4 The only exceptions to this are political publicity, which is handled by individual political groups and political assistants, and positive publicity relating to schools.
- 1.5 The purpose of this protocol is to define the roles and responsibilities of all officers and members involved in dealing with the media and their role in internal and external publications, as well as providing guidance on how to handle media interest.

2. Legal context

- 2.1 The council operates within the terms of a legal framework set out in the Local Government Act of 1986.
- 2.2 This protocol also reflects the most recent government guidance regarding local authority communications, which is contained in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (2011).
- 2.3 All publicity will be produced in line with the council's equality policies.

3. City of York Council's approach to publicity

- 3.1 The council is committed to providing effective communication so that residents and partners are well informed about services that affect their lives and how their money is spent and are able to take an active part in the council's decision-making process

- 3.2 The local, regional and national media plays a valuable role in helping the council reach large numbers of local residents, businesses, stakeholders and visitors. It is therefore vital that we communicate effectively.
- 3.3 City of York Council is committed to being open and transparent about the decisions the council takes and who is accountable for those decisions.
- 3.4 The council aims to continue to foster positive working relationships with the media. Wherever we can we will take a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews.
- 3.5 Underpinning the work of the Communications & Media team, including all dealings with the media, is a number of fundamental principles:
- **Proactive publicity** is a key part of our role. The council will proactively look to promote the work of the authority and its partners on behalf of the city.
 - **Honesty is vital.** The council will never knowingly mislead the media on a story or issue. We are in a long-term relationship with the media and they must trust our counsel and respect our honesty of approach.
 - **Information is accessible and timely.** We are firm, but polite in our dealings with the media. We aim to return media calls as soon as possible, while managing conflicting pressures and deadlines. A council media officer is available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.
 - **We are open and fair.** The council does not routinely favour one media source over another. Where appropriate, we will identify the relative importance of media sources and will be able to clearly justify any strategy that promotes one over another.

4. The media

- 4.1 Local – includes newspapers and magazines such as the York Press, York Star, and Local Link and Look it up. Local radio stations include BBC Radio York and Minster FM.
- 4.2 Regional – this includes the Yorkshire Post and regional television stations: BBC Look North (Leeds and Newcastle) and ITV Calendar (Yorkshire and Tyne Tees. News agencies, which feed stories to national media, also have regional offices locally, including the Press Association and Guezellian.
- 4.3 National – this sector includes all national newspapers and TV stations (BBC, ITN, Channel 4 and Channel 5 news) plus BBC Radio and Independent Radio.

- 4.4 International – Occasionally local stories generate international interest in which case Sky TV and overseas publications can be interested.
- 4.5 Specialist – the council generates information about a wide variety of subjects many of which have associated specialist publications. We may want to target these specialist media from time to time with specific information. Specialist publications include The Municipal Journal, The Local Government Chronicle, The Times Educational Supplement (TES), Housing Today and Community Care magazine.
- 4.6 Internet/social media – this is the fastest growing area of the media. All broadcasters and newspapers provide online and social media news services, as well as using the council's web and social media sites for getting information about the council and its services.

5. Identifying newsworthy items

- 5.1 Identifying newsworthy issues is the responsibility of everyone working for the council. However, the Council Leader, cabinet members and chief officers have particular responsibility for flagging up items of interest, positive or negative, as soon as possible.
- 5.2 Members of the Communications & Media team will attend key meetings, including Cabinet, Full Council and departmental management teams, to try to identify items of interest.
- 5.3 The team will offer advice about any communications issues and should be notified of any potentially controversial policies, decisions or events.

6. Handling media enquiries

- 6.1 The Communications & Media team 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 Council spokespeople where appropriate.
- 6.2 Officers who are directly approached by a member of the media should not answer questions themselves; but should refer the journalist to the Communications & Media who will manage the response.
- 6.3 Members who are directly approached by a member of the media can respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol.
- 6.4 Simple, factual queries will be dealt with by the Communications and Media team without reference to other officers or Cabinet members.
- 6.5 Where enquiries are covered by pre-agreed statements, Communications & Media staff will respond directly, without seeking additional clearance from directors, other senior officers or members.

- 6.6 When seeking a response to an enquiry, the Communications and Media team will advise officers and members of journalists' deadlines and, where appropriate, of the consequences of missing the deadlines.
- 6.7 The council will not normally comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff.
- 6.8 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 will explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

7. Press releases

- 7.1 Press releases are one of the key ways of publicising council activities, decisions and achievements.
- 7.2 The Communications & Media team will issue all news releases on behalf of the council. This allows a central record to be maintained and ensures that releases follow a Council style, appropriate for the media being targeted.
- 7.3 Press releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, nor publicise the activities of individual councillors.
- 7.4 All releases will be published on the council's website by the Communications & Media team within one working day of issue.
- 7.5 Key messages from releases will also be disseminated using social media channels, as appropriate.
- 7.6 Information for news releases should be submitted to the Communications & Media team as soon as possible.
- 7.7 Information for news releases or articles can be passed to the team in note format i.e. does not need to be properly formatted. Any information sent to the team will be subject to editing.
- 7.8 Quotes in news releases or articles will routinely be attributed to the relevant Cabinet member, particularly when the story relates to council policy, new initiatives or major issues or events. Highlighting the link between elected representatives and council decisions will help residents understand the decision-making process and will increase local accountability.
- 7.9 A relevant officer may be quoted if the purpose of the quote is to provide factual or technical information or if the appropriate member is unavailable.
- 7.10 Press releases relating to the Lord Mayor of York and activities of the Civic Party will be issued on a civic press release template and will be cleared with the relevant civic officer.
- 7.11 Final approval for news releases (after they have been written/edited) will be sought from the originator in most cases. Where a member is quoted, the member will also be asked for approval.

- 7.12 In the case of sensitive, significant or controversial issues approval may also be sought from chief officers or the Council Leader, or statutory officers where appropriate.
- 7.13 The Communications & Media team will seek approval on the factual content of a releases and articles. Matters of style, presentation, punctuation, grammar etc are the responsibility of the team.
- 7.14 Press releases containing time sensitive information may be sent to the media with an embargo. Any such releases will be clearly marked with the date and time the information can be made public.

8. Interviews

- 8.1 Any officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to the Communications & Media team.
- 8.2 The team will liaise with the relevant department/partner organisation to ensure that the most appropriate person is put forward for interview.
- 8.3 Officers will be used to present factual/technical information and when the council's reputation can be enhanced by information provided by a perceived 'expert'. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of the council's approved and agreed policies.
- 8.4 The Cabinet member with responsibility for the relevant area will be put forward for interviews relating to policy issues and contentious decisions.
- 8.5 The Communications & Media team can provide information of how to prepare for a media interview and can provide general media training if appropriate.

9. Publicising meetings

- 9.1 All council papers, with the exception of exempt items, will be sent to the local media at the same time they are made available to the public.
- 9.2 Communication & Media staff will attend Cabinet and Full Council meetings to identify which issues may attract media interest, or those that need to be communicated to a wider audience.
- 9.3 In addition, officers and Cabinet members should make the Communications & Media team aware of any potentially newsworthy issues as soon as possible, before the meeting agenda is made public.
- 9.4 The Communications & Media team will aim to issue press releases summarising the main points of reports from key meetings, at the same time as the papers are issued. Such summaries are often more attractive to journalists than complex and lengthy reports.

- 9.5 Quotes in any releases of this nature will be restricted to providing information, rather than anticipating an outcome or expressing a view to a preferred outcome of the meeting.
- 9.6 Approval for the release will be sought from the relevant officer/Cabinet member.
- 9.7 Information relating to council reports will be embargoed until publication of the papers.

10. Post-meeting publicity

- 10.1 Press releases confirming the decisions taken at meetings may be issued following key meetings, such as Budget Council.

11. Cabinet meetings

- 11.1 The process and principles are the same as for council meetings.
- 11.2 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.
- 11.3 Information relating to Cabinet reports will be embargoed until publication of the papers.

12. Scrutiny committees

- 12.1 The basic process and principles are the same as for council and Cabinet meetings. Chairs of the scrutiny committee will represent the views/work of their scrutiny committee to the media. The post of chair has a non-political role when representing the views of the scrutiny committee.
- 12.2 The Council will not prepare press releases for the Chairs of Scrutiny Committees.
- 12.3 To avoid confusion or misrepresentation, members should make clear when they are speaking in their capacity as a scrutiny chair.

13. Ward Committees

- 13.1 The basic process and principles are the same as for council, Cabinet and scrutiny committees. The chairs of ward committees are expected to represent the views of the committee as a whole.
- 13.2 Where a journalist wants to find out more about what happened at a ward committee they will be referred to the chair or to the relevant ward councillors.

14. Individual councillors and political groups

14.1 The Communications & Media team 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 council meeting.

15. Political issues

15.1 The council will not give an official response on 'political' issues. However, a council response can be used to correct inaccurate information or set out the council's position.

16. Pre-election publicity

16.1 The rules governing publicity change once an election has been announced. During this period publicity issued by the council should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual members of groups of members. This is to ensure that no individual councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in council publicity.

16.2 Officers may be quoted in place of councillors during this period, providing the quote is apolitical.

16.3 Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve members likely to be standing for election.

16.4 Members holding key political or civic positions are 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.

16.5 Further advice on publicity during election periods is available from the Assistant Director of Governance and ICT, the Communications & Media team and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

17. Schools

17.1 Schools are encouraged to develop good relationships with their local media. They should be proactive and avoid conflict. News releases issued by schools should be copied to the Communications and Media team.

17.2 Schools should always alert the Communications & Media team to any controversial issues at the earliest possible opportunity – preferably before journalists have picked up on the story. Information supplied in this way will be held in confidence and only used to inform future media statements/releases.

17.3 The team can give advice and support to school staff on media issues, including providing media training where appropriate and handling negative issues on behalf of the school.

17.4 Advice is always available by telephone during office hours. In an emergency, out of hours assistance is available through the council's emergency procedures.

18. Partnerships

18.1 Where the council is involved in issuing a press release as part of a partnership arrangement, the partnership's arrangements for whom to quote should be followed. This would normally be the chair of the organisation. In the case of a press release being prepared on behalf of a number of partners it may be appropriate to offer each partner an opportunity to be quoted. All partners should be given an opportunity to approve the release within a set timeframe.

19. Non-council related media activity

19.1 Officers and members of the council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-council related organisations must not refer to their council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-council related organisation.

19.2 Trade union officers who are employees of the council and who have contact with the media in their trade union capacity must make clear that they are speaking as a union representative. If trade union officers have contact with the media in their capacity as a council employee, then the relevant provisions of this protocol relating to council officers will apply.

20. Managing negative issues

20.1 From time to time the council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that we manage these situations so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

20.2 Members and officers must alert the Communications & Media team as soon as a potentially negative issue, which may attract media interest comes to light. They should not wait until contacted by the media.

20.3 The Communications & Media team will work with members and officers and to prepare holding statements ahead of any media contact regarding a negative issue.

21. Correcting inaccurate reporting

21.1 The Communications & Media team scan the media daily to identify inaccurate reporting and will alert the relevant officer/member where appropriate.

21.2 The team will work with the relevant officer or member to agree what action is appropriate, for example, a conversation with the journalist, requesting a correction, a letter to the editor, or seeking legal advice.

22. Leaked documents

22.1 Many officers and members of the council have access to internal documents that may be of interest to media organisations. If information is leaked to the media, for example prior to an agenda being published, the council will not normally comment on the issue.

22.2 The leak will be reported to the relevant chief officer for further investigation.

23. External publications

23.1 Quotes in articles will routinely be attributed to the relevant Cabinet member, particularly when the story relates to council policy, new initiatives or major issues or events.

23.2 Photographs of relevant Cabinet members/the council leader can be included in publications as appropriate. The council can also produce publications showing images of all the authority's 47 councillors. Highlighting the link between elected representatives and council decisions will help residents understand the decision-making process and will increase local accountability.

23.3 A relevant officer may be quoted if the purpose of the quote is to provide factual or technical information or if the appropriate member is unavailable.