



Public relations and media protocol

Purpose of document

To provide clarity and agreement on who should represent Dorset Councils Partnership and sovereign councils in corporate public and media relations activity.

These guidelines relate to proactive (council-led) and reactive (media/community-led) publicity and will help councillors, staff and the authorities' communications professionals decide who should represent the partnership and individual councils.

Background

Individual councillors decide if, and how often, they use the local media to raise awareness of issues concerning those who live in their ward.

This document deals with the issue of who should represent the corporate body in its media and public relations work. In the majority of cases this will be councillors, although officers have an important role to play in supporting elected members, particularly when speaking about the shared services partnership as an employer, to communicate technical or complex operational matters, and around election times when political publicity restrictions are in place.

Media statements should not be given from a "council spokesman", as this reinforces perceptions of councils as nameless/faceless organisations.

All those acting as spokespeople for the partnership should have received media training and can expect to receive appropriate support and information from the partnership management and communications professionals.

All identified spokespeople will be expected to respond positively to requests for interview.

This may include early breakfast radio slots and, occasionally, weekend or other out of office hours interviews.

The protocol

In the event of significant proactive (news release, letter to editor, photo opportunity) or reactive (request for a comment or interview from press, radio or TV) publicity, the following procedures apply:

North Dorset District Council

- The Leader or relevant portfolio holder will be approached to take part or provide a comment.

- Where an issue is the subject of ongoing scrutiny or policy development, the chairman or, if unavailable, the vice-chairman of the relevant committee may be approached to take part or provide a comment. Their comments should make it clear that decisions are the function of Cabinet and Full Council.

West Dorset District Council

- The relevant portfolio holder, or in their absence the Leader, will be approached to take part or provide a comment.
- Where an issue is the subject of ongoing scrutiny or policy development, the chairman or, if unavailable, the vice-chairman of the relevant committee may be approached to take part or provide a comment. Their comments should make it clear that decisions are the function of the Strategy Committee and Full Council.

Weymouth & Portland Borough Council

- The relevant briefholder and the Chairman of Harbour Management Board.
- The Leader, or if unavailable, vice-chairman of Management Committee, where the briefholder cannot participate.
- Where an issue is the subject of ongoing scrutiny or development, the chairman or, if unavailable, the vice-chairman of the scrutiny and performance/policy development committee may be approached to take part or provide a comment. Their comments should make it clear that decisions are the function of the Management Committee and Full Council.

Other spokespeople

Chairmen, or if unavailable, vice-chairmen of decision-making and joint committees, such as the planning and licensing committees, may be approached to speak on individual planning or licensing applications.

However, comments on overarching policy should come from the portfolio holder/briefholder.

For example: the spokesperson on general planning policies used to determine planning applications in Weymouth and Portland would be the environment briefholder.

The Mayor/Chairman or Deputy Mayor/Vice-chairman of Council as "first citizen" will be asked to comment on general and civic/ceremonial matters. Examples include observance of respectful silence, young persons' award scheme and death of a former councillor.

Officer spokesmen

The Chief Executive will be the spokesman on matters related to the partnership as a whole, such as for employment matters. The Chief Executive is supported by the Monitoring Officer on matters of probity/conduct and the Section 151 Officer on budget issues.

Where the publicity surrounds an operational or complex/technical matter it may be appropriate for the most appropriate officer to participate.

Officer spokesmen may be necessary where speed is of the essence in order to protect council reputation or public safety, such as in a fast-moving emergency incident.

The most appropriate officer may also be used in difficult circumstances or to support the comments of a councillor.

Ward matters

A local ward member may be quoted as a community representative on a matter of particular local interest. Where multiple ward members have opposing views or disagree with the corporate stance on a project, it is for members to agree a statement that everyone can support.

Where this is not possible, the statement will be attributed to the Leader of Council/Chairman of Management Committee.

Regardless of the council spokesperson used, public statements on a ward-specific issue should be sent to the ward councillor for information, comment and amendment before they are released.

Council news releases will be circulated to all councillors by email when they are issued.

Incidental quotes

Sometimes officers find themselves unintentionally quoted in the media. For example, reporters may reproduce a statement from a public committee agenda and present this as a direct quote from the officer who wrote the report. The media may also attend a meeting where a council officer is giving a presentation as part of the council's community engagement work.

This incidental quoting of officers is unavoidable.

Election times

Officers may also have to step in around election times, as the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity states: "The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of those politicians involved directly in the election." In these circumstances statements will be provided by officers (see section on officer spokespeople).

Political statements

Corporate communications are not the place for political statements. Indeed, the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity warns against this.

Comments from councillors speaking in their role as leaders of political parties are entirely a matter for them and members of their group. It is not the council's role to present conflicting

political views.

Letters to newspaper

As a general rule, the council will seek redress for inaccurate or misleading information published in the press by means of a balancing or positive article. However, on occasion a "Letter to the Editor" may be the best way to set the record straight. In these cases, the guidelines outlined above should be applied to determine the author.

Online comments

Public comments on online news stories are now commonplace. We respect the views of all people and recognise that comments can be made to represent all sides of the story and can be made without possession of the full facts.

We will only ask for a news outlet to consider moderating comments if they are:

1. Considered libellous towards a councillor, officer or person acting on behalf of the partnership.
2. Considered abusive or threatening towards a named councillor, officer or person acting on behalf of the partnership.

Corporate support

This protocol should be viewed in the knowledge that communications professionals are always willing to advise councillors and staff involved in raising each council's profile.

Officers will be happy to draft a comment and to provide advice and support to anyone who is about to be interviewed by the media.

Advice on conducting media interviews or using social media is available and specific media relations training can be arranged.

All media enquiries which require a response from the council should be made known to communications staff and copied to the Chief Executive and relevant director.