

Media protocol for Dorset Council

This protocol is for Dorset Council employees and councillors working with the media. It outlines the procedures that we will follow in a variety of situations and explains who should represent the council in its media and public relations work.

The communications and engagement team leads on media relations for Dorset Council and aims to:

- improve public understanding of the work of the council
- maintain positive and honest relations between the council and the media
- manage all sensitive or contentious media issues in an open manner
- provide support and give advice to employees and councillors.

The team also monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of media relations.

Roles and responsibilities

Councillors and employees (usually senior officers) are expected to act as spokespeople for Dorset Council. As a rule, councillors will speak to the media on matters relating to council policy, decision making, and local ward issues. Officers will comment on technical information or operational matters.

All those acting as spokespeople for the council should have received media training and will receive appropriate support and briefing from senior officers and the communications and engagement team. If you or a member of your team need media training, contact the communications and engagement team.

- **Councillors**

Cabinet members, Lead members and chairs of committees should be briefed by relevant officers and the communications and engagement team about controversial or high-profile issues which attract, or are likely to attract, media attention.

Publicity produced by the council should be free from any political bias. This is outlined in the [Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#). 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.**

However, the leader, chairman, cabinet members, lead members and committee chairs will often be approached by the media, as representatives of Dorset Council, to comment on corporate issues. Officers must make sure that councillors, if they wish so, are properly briefed and guided on handling such enquiries.

The leader, relevant cabinet member or lead member should comment on corporate issues or major directorate projects and committee chairs should comment on major committee decisions.

- **Local ward matters**

A local ward councillor should have the opportunity to be quoted in a press release as a community representative on a matter of particular local interest.

Ward councillors may be approached directly by the media relating to issues within their ward. It is acknowledged that ward councillors may liaise directly with the media on specific ward issues, but they should make it clear that this is their personal view rather than the corporate view of the council. Where engagement has taken place with the media, ward councillors are requested to notify the communications and engagement team.

Officers

- **Chief executive and executive directors**

They are responsible for endorsing and overseeing the protocol. They will lead by example, responding positively wherever possible to requests for interviews or statements.

Executive directors are responsible for ensuring the protocol is followed in their directorates. They liaise with the communications and engagement team, approving releases, statements and giving interviews as required. They should inform the communications team about any high-profile or contentious issues, giving as much notice as possible.

- **Officers**

Officers will assist the communications and engagement team in providing information for press releases and statements, preferably in advance. Where appropriate, and with agreement from the communications and engagement team, officers may also respond directly to enquiries and supply factual information.

The communications and engagement team must be the first point of contact for all media enquiries. If you receive a call directly from a journalist, please pass it to the communications team.

Interviews

The council often receives requests for radio or television interviews. These may include early breakfast radio slots and, occasionally, weekend or other out of office hours interviews.

We will always try to satisfy interview requests to make sure we remain open and transparent. Where the publicity is about an operational or complex/technical matter it may be appropriate for an officer to do the interview.

Officer spokespeople may be necessary where speed is of the essence 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.

Statements

The council regularly receives requests for statements on local, regional and national issues. It's important that we provide statements to make sure news about the council is fair, balanced and accurate.

'No comment' is never acceptable. Even on the rare occasions when we really can't say anything, we must explain why.

Statements should not go out from a 'council spokesperson', as this reinforces perceptions of councils as faceless organisations.

Appendix B

If asked to provide information for, or approve, a statement, both officers and councillors should respond by the end of the working day (unless otherwise agreed).

Final editorial sign-off will rest with the communications and engagement team, pending approval from the relevant senior officer and councillor.

Press releases

A press release may highlight something positive, defend something controversial, explain a complex issue, provide information or promote council activities and events. It should help promote a better understanding of the council and must be free of any party-political bias.

All press releases must be issued by the communications and engagement team. Council press releases will be emailed to all councillors, the relevant director, chief executive and customer services teams for information.

Press releases should include a quote from a councillor, usually the relevant Portfolio Holder - with the exception of those issued at very short notice, dealing with minor/routine council business or in the run-up to elections.

Final editorial sign-off will rest with the communications and engagement team, pending approval from the relevant senior officer and councillor.

Please give the communications team at least five working days' notice of all requests for press releases in order to guarantee timely distribution to the media. In cases where this notice is not given then the team will have to assess workload prior to agreeing to support the project. There are cases where support would always be given, such as an emergency incident.

Quotes from committee reports and meetings

It is common for journalists to quote from a public committee report and present this as a direct quote from the officer who wrote the paper. The media may also attend a public meeting and quote any council officer or councillor who speaks at that meeting. This is perfectly acceptable.

The communications and engagement team should be made aware at the earliest opportunity of any committee reports that are likely to receive media interest.

The importance of being proactive

With most news outlets now using social media and posting news 24/7, it is even more important that we publicise high-profile issues and respond to media enquiries as soon as possible.

Good and timely media relations will help:

- improve public understanding of the work of Dorset Council
- provide a proper flow of public information
- defend the council from unfounded criticism by ensuring people are presented with all the relevant facts
- help make sure press coverage about the council is fair, balanced and accurate

It is always best to plan ahead. If the council is on the back foot, a story can sometimes spiral out of control and end up being distorted. This can often be avoided if facts are presented as

quickly possible. The communications and engagement team can do this through a variety of ways – including press releases, e-newsletters, videos and sharing content on social media and our website.

The communications and engagement team must be informed at the earliest opportunity about any potential high-profile or controversial issues to help prepare key messages and make sure colleagues and councillors are informed.

Corrections

If the media has reported misleading or inaccurate information, then we may wish to raise this with them. The communications and engagement team will advise on the best way to tackle the issue.

As a general rule, the council will seek to correct 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 under 'roles and responsibilities' should be applied to determine the author and handled by the communications and engagement team.

Online comments

Members of the public often comment on online news stories. 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 council.
2. Considered abusive or threatening towards a named councillor, officer or person acting on behalf of the council.

The communications and engagement team does not routinely monitor online comments, but you can notify the team if you have a concern.

Photographs and video

When using photographs or video in any publicity, we must get written permission from the person being photographed or filmed. An explanation of how the photos and/or footage will be used should also be given.

However, you don't have to gain the permission of each individual featured in photographs of large groups (e.g. crowd scenes) or if they can't be recognised (e.g. shots of the back of their heads). However, consideration should be given to the use of such images in relation to sensitive or potentially contentious issues.

Photographing/filming children should be handled with great care. Permission of a parent or guardian must always be given beforehand, and explicit consent sought before publishing on the internet.

The communications and engagement team can give you photograph/video consent forms and provide you with further guidance.

Pre-election period (also known as 'purdah')

During pre-election periods (the eight weeks immediately before an election), local authority officers need to consider what they say and how they say it.

During this period the council cannot be seen to be influencing voters in any way through publicity. Publicity is defined as "any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public".

During purdah we must not:

- produce publicity on matters which are politically controversial
- make references to individual politicians or groups in press releases
- arrange proactive media or events involving candidates
- issue photographs which include candidates
- supply council photographs or other materials to councillors or political group colleagues unless you have verified that they will not be used for campaigning purposes
- use councillors in news releases and events in pre-election periods

We are allowed to:

- publish factual information to counteract misleading or controversial information
- use relevant lead officers, rather than councillors, for press releases
- use a politician who is involved in an election when the council is required to respond particular circumstances, such as in an emergency situation or where there is a genuine need for a member-level response to an important event beyond the council's control.

Contact the communications and engagement team

The communications and engagement team manage media relations for Dorset Council and can provide you with advice and support.

They must be the first point of contact for all media enquiries and are also responsible for issuing all official press releases and statements to the media.

Comms email: comms@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Comms phone number: 01305 858233

In the case of an out-of-hours emergency, call 07776 660986.