

CULLOMPTON TOWN COUNCIL



MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Failure to follow the Town Council's Policy on Media Communications could lead to a breach of the statutory Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Council's reputation and efficiency. It is important that all Members and Officers who might come into contact with the media understand the implications of this Code which this policy explains within a local context.

Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to ensure that the messages put out by the Council are consistent and accurate. However, if communication is managed effectively, the Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

Cullompton Town Council throughout the year

- receives enquiries from the media
- issues news releases
- organises photo opportunities
- arranges interviews
- produces its own newsletter

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Members involved in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest. It is further to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be:

- open and honest
- proactive
- responsive and timely
- in line with the Council's Equal Opportunities policy

2. THE TOWN COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO PUBLICITY

The media plays a large role in informing residents about what the Council does and how it spends their money. It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible takes a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews so that:

- The Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and willing to listen
- There are opportunities to share and celebrate the Council's successes
- Information is provided about policies and services as well as the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council and its work
- Negative issues are handled clearly and decisively

The main media is the local and regional press together with local radio and television stations. It is unlikely that Cullompton would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level but this policy is written to ensure that it is relevant to these cases should they occur. It is also recognised that the internet is the fastest growing area of the media and that many broadcasters and newspapers include information on Cullompton and Cullompton Town Council.

3. IDENTIFYING NEWSWORTHY ITEMS

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Town Clerk to make the decision as to whether or not a news release should be issued.

4. HANDLING MEDIA ENQUIRIES

The Town Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the Town Council office. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the Town Mayor to respond to the enquiry.

Members of the Town Council's staff who are directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves and should refer the enquirer to the Town Clerk.

Members of the Council who are directly approached by the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this policy.

The Council should not pass comments on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. The phrase “no comment” should not be used as a response to a media enquiry. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

5. PRESS RELEASES

The use of press releases is a key technique for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.

There are two types of news release:

(a) Council Press Releases

An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written and issued by the Town Clerk. Official Council releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Councillor. Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a Member’s political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official Council releases will be placed on the Council’s website.

(b) Councillor Press Releases

Councillor press releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. This type of release may or may not be political and should not include the name of any Officer, use the Council logo or the Council telephone number as a point of contact. It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases to be provided to the Clerk. Councillors seeking advice can contact the Clerk.

NOTE: Members should be aware that case law states that the role of Councillor overrides the right to act as an individual. This means that Councillors should be careful when expressing individual views to the news media. Councillors also have an obligation to respect Council policy once made, while it may be legitimate for a Councillor to make it clear that he or she disagreed with a policy and voted against it (if this took place in open session), they should not seek to undermine a decision through the news media.

6. INTERVIEWS

Any member of staff contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the matter to the Clerk. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist. Officers should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages, their role being to provide expertise and factual

knowledge only in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.

7. MEDIA COVERAGE OF MEETINGS

Many stories relating to the Council will be picked up from agendas and reports in advance of meetings, all agendas being sent direct to local media. All background papers should carry the message "This report may contain the recommendations of an Officer or Member of the Council but these are subject to the final decision of the Town Council at its meeting".

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Council and committee meetings. During meetings Members should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what may be a complex issue.

8. PUBLICITY DURING ELECTIONS

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (purdah) all proactive publicity about candidates and other politicians is halted. This applies to scheduled local, national or European elections. During this period Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required the relevant Officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this policy.

9. NON-COUNCIL RELATED MEDIA

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.

10. MANAGING NEGATIVE ISSUES

From time to time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Members must alert the Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest is known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

Members and Officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

11. CORRECTING INACCURATE REPORTING

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the

Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who is the most appropriate person to take the agreed action.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain; each case should be judged individually.

Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising and stating how the Council will learn from the error or put it right.

12. TOWN COUNCIL NEWSLETTERS

The Town Council has its own newsletter (Cullompton Crier) which aims to promote council policies, services, activities and initiatives. The content is created in-house in consultation with appropriate Councillors. Ideas for articles will be welcomed and should be passed directly to the Clerk or the Editor.

13. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The Council office will continually monitor the media coverage and will report any findings to the Promoting Cullompton Committee.

14. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND DATA PROTECTION

Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes.

Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt. The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.

In addition care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 1998 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

15. INTERNET USE

Internet use covers all websites, networking sites, e-mails, forums and blogs which may be used by both Officers and Councillors. If they are used in an official capacity or on Council-related business, the guidance in this policy must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

When acting in the capacity of Cullompton Town Council, websites should not :

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or use for campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner