

Communications and PR Procedure

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This procedure supports the Communications and PR Policy and should be read in conjunction with this policy.
- 1.2 This procedure should also be read in conjunction with the town council's standing orders and code of conduct. Standing order 22.a. states: 'Requests from the press or other media for an oral or written comment or statement from the council, its councillors or staff shall be handled in accordance with the council's policy in respect of dealing with the press and/or other media.'
- 1.3 The town council recognises its responsibility to help communicate accurate and timely information to the press and public in a professional manner. Proper co-ordination will ensure that messages put out by the council are consistent and accurate.
- 1.4 The council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communication.
- 1.5 The purpose of the town council's Communications and PR Policy and Procedure is to ensure its members and staff effectively communicate this information to promote the openness and transparency of the council.
- 1.6 The town council also recognises the distinction between communication from 'the town council', and communication from individuals as 'councillors'.
- 1.7 Communication of information may be viewed in four main mediums; print, electronic, media relations, and public relations. However, communication with the press and public takes place every day on a very basic level, i.e. desk enquiries, speaking to residents in the street.
- 1.8 The town council respects freedom of speech and this procedure is not intended to restrain this.
- 1.9 Local councils and their representatives are governed by national legislation and codes of practice. The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. Communications activity must adhere to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011, which provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity. This code is statutory guidance and therefore councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions. Copies of these documents are available for inspection in the council office.
- 1.10 All publicity will be produced in line with the council's equality and diversity guidelines.

2. Handling General Requests

- 2.1 All staff and councillors are responsible for communicating basic and routine information to the press and public in relation to their specific job duties or role within the council and its committees.

2.2 Requests for information outside of the remit of an individual's responsibilities should be referred to the relevant member of staff or councillor.

3. Responding to media enquiries

3.1 The town council respects the media's role in delivering information to the public and responses will be given in recognition of deadlines, which are crucial to effective media relations.

3.2 The media are crucially important in conveying information to the community, so the council must maintain positive, constructive media relations.

3.3 The media work on behalf of the local community to hold the council to account for its policies and actions, and it is therefore important that they have access to officers and members and to background information to help them in this role.

3.4 Requests for interviews, information or photographs from the media should be referred initially to the administrative officer, or in their absence, to the deputy town clerk.

3.5 Any response will be collated in conjunction with the town clerk, deputy town clerk, or operations manager. Where possible, responses will be given by committee chairmen, or in their absence, vice-chairmen. All responses will be signed off by the town clerk, or in their absence, the deputy town clerk.

3.6 Official statements from the town council must be issued on a document bearing the council's masthead, an appropriate title, dated, and with details of who to contact for further information.

3.7 Statements made must reflect the minuted opinion of the council, where applicable.

3.8 Councillors may be approached directly by the media and can provide responses, making it clear that the views given are their own and not necessarily those of the council. Members should not claim to be commenting on behalf of the town council.

3.9 The town council recognises that councillors have private lives and may be approached by the media in relation to their roles outside of the council. In this instance, members must make it clear they are not commenting as an elected councillor or on behalf of the town council.

3.10 Requests to take photographs of councillors or staff in relation to council business must be agreed by the individual and in the case of staff, by their line manager.

3.11 There is no out-of-hours media relations service, although councillors can be contacted outside of normal office hours as their contact details are available in the public domain. In extreme circumstances, the town clerk is listed as the contact in the council's emergency procedure and will liaise with the media if necessary.

3.12 The council should not pass comment on anonymous allegations or allegations about individual councillors or staff.

3.13 The council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

3.14 Members and staff must alert the town clerk as soon as a potentially positive or negative issue which may attract media interest becomes known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

4. Issuing news releases

4.1 As well as responding to media requests, the town council will pro-actively issue news releases and distribute them to the relevant media.

4.2 Press releases must be issued on a document bearing the council's masthead, an appropriate title, dated, and with details of who to contact for further information.

4.3 Press releases are non-party political and wherever possible will include a quote from a councillor.

4.4 Releases will not publicise the activities of individual councillors or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

4.5 Photographs may be issued with the news releases and captions must be included in the release. If photographs include councillors or staff, point 3.10 will apply.

4.6 Press releases will be sent by email to the relevant media, displayed on the town council website, on the council's noticeboards, on the council's social media pages, and if applicable on the lymeregis.org website.

4.7 The administrative officer will be responsible for developing news releases in conjunction with the relevant councillor or staff member. Any other officer or members may draft a press release, but they must be issued through the council office in line with points 4.2 to 4.6, and in agreement with the town clerk, or in their absence the deputy town clerk.

4.8 Letters to the editor of a newspaper do not qualify as press releases and caution is advised when submitting a letter of this kind. It may be appropriate for the council to submit a letter on occasions, such as correcting factual errors. These letters should be factual and brief.

4.9 Other ways to correct inaccurate reporting about the council include issuing a separate news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor, or legal advice.

4.10 Officers and members have a responsibility to identify newsworthy items and seek opportunities where it may be beneficial to issue a press release.

4.11 Although not common practice within this council, councillor press releases may be issued. These are personal releases 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 masthead or crest, or the council telephone number, address, or email as a point of contact. It would be beneficial for copies of

intended releases to be provided to the town clerk in advance of their release to the press.

6. Media attendance at council meetings

- 6.1 Local media outlets will be provided on request with the agendas, reports and minutes of meetings, prior to them taking place, as required by the Local Government Act 1972.
- 6.2 The press will be provided with reasonable facilities, i.e. seating and a desk, at meetings or part of a meeting at which they are entitled to be present, as outlined in standing order 3.o.
- 6.3 The photographing, recording, broadcasting or transmitting the proceedings of meetings by the media is outlined in standing order 3.m and 3.n.

7. Council website

- 7.1 The council website should provide an informative online resource for residents and visitors, giving information about the council, the town, councillors and staff, services provided by the council, the local community, news, links to useful websites, minutes and agendas, and a search facility.
- 7.2 Information on the website should be accurate and kept up-to-date.
- 7.3 Press releases and council notices should be displayed in the news section of the website.

8. Council column

- 8.1 The council will produce a monthly news column for the local press, providing residents with interesting and informative news about the council, its staff and members, and community issues that are linked to the council.
- 8.2 The column will be produced by the administrative officer, or in their absence, the deputy town clerk. Ideas for inclusion in the newsletter can be submitted by councillors, staff, and members of the community.
- 8.3 Items to be included in the column will be discussed and agreed through the fortnightly publicity meetings attended by the town clerk, administrative officer and delegated members. The group will also discuss other press and publicity matters.

9. Council noticeboards

- 9.1 Priority is given on the council's noticeboards to official council documents, such as agendas, public notices, election information, and legal issues affecting the council.
- 9.2 Where possible, the council will display posters and information for community related issues.

10. Publicity in Election Periods

- 10.1 In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, the council is subject to rules which impact on how it can communicate with the public.
- 10.2 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 ensures that no individual councillor gains an unfair advantage by appearing in official publicity.
- 10.3 In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted.

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Administrative officer
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