

Media Protocol – Executive Summary

It is the policy of Bromsgrove District Council to be open, honest and accurate in dealing with the media and to respond to enquiries within reporters' deadlines as far as is possible, without compromising trust and accuracy.

The Council's Media Protocol explains the ways in which the Press Office manages both its proactive and reactive media responsibilities and how officers must handle their responsibility in working closely with the Press Office and adhering to the protocol.

- The Press Office and Assistant Chief Executive will operate a 24 hour service and provide the media with out of hours contact numbers
- The Press Office will issue all Council press releases.
- Information for press releases will come from two sources:
 - The Member decision making system
 - Officers
- Any quotes included in press releases will reflect the approved or developing policy of the Council and not the views of a particular political party.
- All quotes should be from Members who are the elected representatives and not from officers. Officers should only be quoted in exceptional circumstances.
- The Council will not operate a policy of giving exclusives, making information, interviews etc, available to all interested media.
- Cabinet Members should refer all media queries to their Heads of Service and press office before giving a response in order to confirm facts/figures etc.
- The Press Office will manage the response to all media enquiries (including MPs). All employees of the Council must refer media enquiries and queries from MPs to the Press Office. Requests from journalists under the FOI Act will be handled in accordance with the Council's procedures on FOI.
- All press releases and statements will refer to "Bromsgrove District Council".
- Other than in very exceptional circumstances the Council will not respond to media enquiries with a 'no comment' statement.
- Those involved in major projects or initiatives must develop a media/communications plan agreed with the Corporate Communications, Policy and Performance Team. The Team will also develop service communications plans to be reviewed with Heads of Service each quarter.
- Regular induction programmes will be carried out for the media
- All Officers/Members likely to be involved on a regular basis with the media will undergo media training.
- A range of 'tools' will be used, including press releases, statements, advisory notices, media briefings and press conferences.

The Protocol will reduce the risk of:

- Negative publicity – resulting from slow or non responses to enquiries. Lost opportunity for good news stories – resulting from a lack of press releases and other pro-active work
- Lack of understanding about the Council's role and work – resulting from poorly briefed journalists
- Concerns amongst staff about comments they have made to the press – as a result of well-intentioned, but poorly prepared reactions to difficult media enquiries
- No perception within the media of the Council as a single organisation – resulting from 'departmental' views of services and issues.
- Disillusioned staff – resulting from negative stories appearing in the media before they have been briefed.

Media Protocol

This protocol is governed by provisions in the Local Government Act and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. All publicity (including work with the media) produced by Bromsgrove District Council must adhere to the provisions of this Act and these codes.

1 Introduction

1.1 Bromsgrove District's Media Policy

It has been and will continue to be the policy of Bromsgrove District Council to be open, honest and accurate in dealing with the media and to respond to enquiries within reporters' deadlines as far as is possible. However, trust and accuracy will not be compromised by their demands. Other than in very exceptional circumstances the Council will not respond to media enquiries with a 'no comment' statement.

1.2 Principles of Bromsgrove District's relationship with the media

The Council is committed to effective communications so that citizens of the District are well informed about Council services, the reasons for decisions and the role they can play in shaping future developments. The local and national media has the potential to reach large numbers of local residents and the Council welcomes the need for accountability that this inevitably brings. It recognises the role the media can play as a conduit for sharing and demonstrating the Council's Vision and Values, in particular, highlighting its role as a community leader. The local government press has the potential to position Bromsgrove District as a Council that is serious about improvement. Bromsgrove District Council will use the media as one of a number of ways of communicating with its stakeholders.

1.3 General protocols for working with the media

- All press releases and statements will refer to 'Bromsgrove District Council' reinforcing the non-negotiable to act as one Council. Only when absolutely necessary will a particular directorate or division be named.
- Wherever possible, a named individual will be quoted in the release. When quoting an officer we will give their job title. When quoting a Member we will give their area of responsibility (e.g. Cabinet Member with responsibility for, or Chair of Scrutiny etc.). Anyone who is quoted will be made aware of the fact and will agree the content of that quote. In exceptional circumstances the Assistant Chief Executive or the Press Officer will clear a release and/or quote on behalf of an officer.
- Those involved in major projects or initiatives must develop a media/communications plan agreed with the Corporate Communications, Policy and Performance Team.
- All Officers/Members likely to be involved on a regular basis with the media will undergo media training.

1.4 Risk assessment

Without a clearly established protocol for the way in which the Council works proactively and reactively with the media there is a significant risk of:

- Negative publicity – resulting from slow or non responses to enquiries
- Lost opportunity for good news stories – resulting from a lack of press releases and other proactive work
- Lack of understanding about the Council's role and work – resulting from poorly briefed journalists
- Concerns amongst staff about comments they have made to the press – as a result of well-intentioned, but poorly prepared reactions to difficult media enquiries
- No perception within the media of the Council as a single organisation – resulting from 'departmental' views of services and issues.
- Disillusioned staff – resulting from negative stories appearing in the media before they have been briefed.

2 Proactive work with the media

2.1 Press Releases

Press Releases should inform and raise awareness about Council services and functions, explain reasons for particular policies and priorities, and improve local accountability. As such they need to catch the attention of the media and ensure good positive coverage about the Council.

2.1.1 Generating press releases

Information for press releases will come from two sources:

- The Member decision making system
- Officers

- **The Member decision making system**

The Press Office can issue press releases following Cabinet and Full Council meetings as a way of confirming decisions made at those meetings. Any quotes will reflect the approved policy of the Council and not the personal views of a particular political party.

The Press Office can issue releases arising from the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Boards with the agreement of the Chairman. The relevant Cabinet Member, the Deputy Leader or Leader will be made aware.

The Press Office may issue releases in advance of decision-making meetings alerting the media to agenda items. In these cases, press releases act as advisory notices and will not contain quotes.

Under the Local Govt Act 2000 the additional powers of well being and community leadership mean that the Council can legitimately become involved in and comment on issues which may be outside its own area of direct responsibility but have an impact on the community. The Press Office will work closely with the Leader on these matters to agree what should be issued to the media.

- **Officers**

Officers will be expected to request the Press Office to issue releases about service improvements, events, consultation initiatives, work in progress and achievements. However, the Press Office will require clearance of any such releases by a Cabinet Member, Director or a Head of Service.

2.1.2 Compiling press releases

The Press Office can receive information for press releases in the following ways:

- **Bullet point information** - explaining the what, when, where, why, who, how of the required content, the preferred timing of the release, how the Press Office can get further information and who will be the spokesperson should there be any subsequent broadcast media interest.
- **Fully written releases** – these do not have to be formatted (the Press Office will take responsibility for the final layout of the release). Please note that the Press Office may contact the originator to discuss changes to the content of the release, to ensure consistency of style and message and to ensure that the release is contributing to the Council's overall key messages.

The Press Office will use a "Notes to Editors" facility at the bottom of press releases to provide background information on either the content of the release or the service area that the release relates to. This is a useful tool for increasing understanding of the Council's services and the Press Office is happy to work with individual Heads of Divisions to establish a permanent "notes to editors" content for all their releases. For example, it may be appropriate to always include some brief information about the role of Environmental Health at the bottom of a Environmental Health press release. Similarly, it may be advantageous to list the services we provide for older people at the bottom of any press release with related content. This can be discussed with individual officers to agree a way forward.

The only contact details given on the release will be the Press Office's. In some circumstances the Assistant Chief Executive or the Press Officer will deem it appropriate to add a further contact number, for example, an officer or Member, or the contact name and number of a representative from a partner organisation.

As embargoes are not legally enforceable they will rarely be used.

All releases will contain a reference number and a database will be held electronically.

2.1.3 Issuing press release

The Press Office will issue all Council press releases.

Releases will be faxed or emailed to all of the following:

- all local & regional newspapers
- Municipal Journal and LGC
- local and regional broadcast media
- local and regional news agencies.

In addition, and if requested, press releases can also be sent to:

- national newspapers
- professional, trade journals.

There may be circumstances where it is deemed appropriate to issue a different release to some media, for example we may deal with the content of a press release differently to interest the business press.

All press releases will be placed on the web site. Copies of all releases will be sent to Members and staff via e-mail.

2.1.4 Issuing press releases following Court Proceedings

The Press Office will ensure that all Press Releases relating to court proceedings do not expose the Council to legal challenge by adhering to the following.

- under the Contempt of Court Act, publication of Court proceedings should be accurate and contemporaneous in order to retain privilege (the right to report proceedings without legal challenge)
- press releases should be sent out on the day of the court case, the day after or at the very latest, the day after that. The release should contain the date of the court case to make it clear when it took place. The onus is then on the media receiving the release to ensure contemporaneous publication. The later the publication of information in a press release, the less safe it is and the more likely it is to lose privilege.
- Information in the press release should be restricted only to information read out in open court. Submitted evidence not read out in open court should not be referred to.
- Information in the press release should be based on fact only ie the charges faced by the defendant, plea, admittance or conviction. Evidence submitted should be referred to as allegations. Evidence withdrawn or not offered should not be referred to.
- Once an appeal has been lodged, there are restrictions on what can be published. Only the basest of information can be given ie name of defendant, conviction and the fact that an appeal has been lodged. This is to avoid prejudicing a future hearing. Any such release will be checked with our Solicitor.
- Court Case press releases will be checked with a Solicitor by the Press Office before publication to ensure factual accuracy.

2.1.5 Partnership releases

Where releases are issued in partnership with another body or company, they will contain both logos with quotes and content agreed by both parties. The Press Office requests that it is alerted to the need for partnership releases in good time due to the complexity of needing to obtain clearance from two or more partners.

2.1.6 Use of photographs

Where a release relates to a subject or initiative that can be photographed, the release will state that there is a 'photo opportunity'. If we already have a quality electronic image it will be emailed with the release. The Press Office will maintain an up to date collection of officer and Member photographs which can be supplied to the media on request.

2.1.7 Follow-up to press releases

Press releases are designed to alert the media to a good news or information item and to attract them through positive stories. They cannot always provide comprehensive information about a subject and may only be able to highlight the basic points about an issue sufficient to raise a journalist's interest. Therefore it is likely that releases will result in follow-up enquiries: from the print media for additional or background information or for clarification; and from the broadcast media for interviews and filming opportunities. Officers and Members should therefore be prepared to make themselves (or a nominated person) available to ensure that the opportunity for publicity and promotion for the Council is not lost.

Journalists should contact the Press Office for further information. If Officers are contacted directly they should refer calls to the Press Office, where staff there will decide on the best course of action.

The Press Office will put the most appropriate person up for interview (i.e. the relevant Member or officer) not a press officer. The Press Office will always provide a briefing for an individual undertaking an interview if they so wish and will always accompany an officer if they are to be filmed.

Whenever a journalist or photographer is on Council premises he/she will be escorted at all times. Filming or photographing of children must not be undertaken without parental permission. Filming of adults on Council premises should only be done with their permission – this includes employees of the Council.

2.2 Media briefings

The use of media briefings is encouraged where significant issues are likely to be complex and controversial. A member of the Press Office will always be present together with the appropriate officers/Members. Briefings will be offered to all the local media contacts.

2.3 Press conferences

Press conferences will be used when an issue is likely to generate significant media interest. Conferences allow us to deal with considerable numbers of media enquiries in an efficient way. The press conference panel will attend a planning meeting with the Head of Communications or the Senior Media Officer prior to the conference. Press conferences will be chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive or the Press Officer who will introduce the panel and control the question and answer session. The Chairman of the panel and in some cases other members of the panel will read a short prepared statement before journalists are invited to ask questions.

2.4 Outcomes of the proactive media protocol

- Press releases will be issued in a timely fashion – the Press Office will judge the best time and day to issue releases based on the volume and nature of releases being issued that week, and the deadlines of the media.
- Press releases will work in harmony with one another and will not result in contradictory messages.
- No one media outlet will be favoured over another.
- The Press Office will keep a central record of the Council's press releases and make all of them available electronically.
- As the Press Office will be the sole point of contact for the media, all follow-up enquiries and requests for interviews will be logged to provide a comprehensive feedback facility on the success of individual releases.

2 Reactive work with the media

3.1 Media enquiries

In its reactive role, the Press Office will work closely with officers and Members to ensure an accurate response to requests for information and comment and to ensure that the Council does not lose its right of reply.

3.1.1 Dealing with media enquiries

All media enquiries must come through the Press Office which operates a 24 hour service. Any journalist contacting an officer by phone must be passed to the Press Office. Members will be contacted by journalists direct and are at liberty to comment without reference to the Press Office; however, Cabinet Members should discuss any responses with their Head of Service before giving a response.

All media enquiries will be logged on a media enquiry form which records the date and time of the enquiry and the action taken by the press officer to secure a comment or information from the relevant officer. In some cases the press officer will respond directly based on prior knowledge of the issue. The majority of responses to media enquiries will be telephone, faxed or emailed and a copy kept for the records. Where appropriate the response, or part of the response, will be in the form of a quote from a named individual.

There will be occasions when the Assistant Chief Executive or the Press Officer deems it preferable for an officer to speak directly to a journalist to avoid the need for a very long and complex written response. Only the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors and Heads of Service will be asked by the Press Office to speak to journalists who have a media enquiry. The officer should then inform the Press Office of the information shared with the journalist so that it can be logged and checked once the story is printed.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 will enable journalists to submit requests in writing for any information held. These written requests can be sent to any officer within the Council. They should be logged with the Corporate Information Governance Manager who will ensure that the correct people are informed of the request so that information can be identified, collated and despatch if appropriate. If the request has been submitted by a journalist, a copy of the request will be sent to the Press Office for information only by the Corporate Information Governance Manager.

3.1.2 Confidentiality

The confidentiality of staff and clients will be maintained. Although we will not issue a 'no comment' response, we will at times issue a statement saying "we do not discuss confidential matters". However, it is usually possible to provide some general information about Council policy and practice to add to this response. Information about individuals will only be given in order to correct an inaccurate assumption or statement or when the individual gives their permission.

When asked about issues that also affect other organisations, the Press Office will liaise with the relevant body, for example the Police, to agree a response.

3.2 Early warnings

All officers are requested to advise the Press Office of any potential negative media stories as soon as possible.

3.3 Letters

All letters to newspapers in response to articles or readers' letters, should be cleared through the Press Office.

3.4 Outcomes of the reactive media protocol

- The Press Office will maintain a record of all media enquiries and responses
- Officers will be freed from the pressure of having to give unprepared statements to journalists
- The same statement will be used to deal with enquiries from a variety of sources relating to the same issue so avoiding duplication of effort and inconsistencies in messages

- The likelihood of mis-information and libelous statements being issued and the chance of confidential information being released are reduced
- Early preparation on potentially negative media stories will reduce the instances of negative/inaccurate reporting and ensure we are able to meet a journalist's deadline
- The image of a confident, responsive, professional Council is built with the media.

4 Monitoring media coverage

The Press Office will monitor and evaluate the coverage the Council receives in the local and local government media and where possible in the national media. A press cuttings service will be provided.

5 Reviewing the media protocol

The Head of Communications will monitor the effectiveness of this media protocol in association with the Corporate Management Team. The protocol will be reviewed annually.

Terms used in the Protocol

- The Media – refers to those who communicate news to the public or to a professional audience, whether through print, radio or TV.
- The Press Office - refers to the staff within the Communications Unit who are authorised by the Head of Communications to work on media issues
- Quote – a comment included in a press release or press statement that is written in speech marks and is attributed to one individual.
- Directors – refers to both corporate and strategic directors and the Chief Executive.
- Officers - refers to all employees of the Council (including CMT and DMT).