

Subject: **Status:** For Publication

Advice for communicating with the media

Report to: Policy Development Overview
and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 20th July 2006

Cabinet

4th August 2006

Report of: Communications Manager

Portfolio

Holder: Customer Services and E-Government

Key Decision: NO

Forward Plan General Exception Special Urgency "X" In Relevant Box

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present communications advice for handling the media. This will help the Council to improve the way that it communicates with the media and minimise the amount of negative media coverage of the Council.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Customers – Maximising the use of the media to communicate with a wide range of the Council's main audiences will help the Council to achieve its corporate objectives and improve its reputation.
- 2.2 Promoting Rossendale – This advice will help the Council to promote the borough through increased media coverage.

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 All the issues raised and the recommendation(s) in this report involve risk considerations as set out below:
- 3.2 Lack of clear advice for handling the media can cause confusion and misunderstanding within a large organisation such as the Council, increasing the risk of damage to its reputation.

4. BACKGROUND/REASON FOR REPORT

4.1 Communications advice for handling the media is one of the actions referred to in the recently approved Communications Action Plan. This advice note forms a key part of the overall Communications Strategy and Customer Services Strategy.

4.2 Desk research was carried out in the preparation of this advice note by contacting more than 20 other local authorities and considering the contents of their various publications. This advice note includes several examples of best practice as identified through the IDeA Connecting with Communities project.

5. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

5.1 Recommended Option

5.2 **Do Nothing Option** – The do nothing option means that the Council will face a greater risk of misunderstandings leading to potentially harmful damage to our reputation.

6. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

6.1 There are no direct financial issues. However, there is in any public communication the risk of libel and slander, for which the Council has insurance cover up to £1m.

7. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

7.1 None

8. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES

8.1 None

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 Advice on how to handle the media is required in order to ensure that the Council maximises the potential benefits of its media coverage and minimises the impact of negative media coverage.

10. RECOMMENDATION(S)

10.1 To recommend to Cabinet that the attached 'Advice for communicating with the media' is adopted.

11. CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

11.1 Council Leader, Portfolio Holder, Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive.

Contact Officer	
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Background Papers	
No background papers	

ADVICE FOR COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA

Introduction

This advice has been produced to help Rossendale Council to improve the way that it communicates with the media, particularly during challenging times. This will help to build and improve the Council's reputation in the eyes of local people, our partners, Members and employees. The advice reflects the new portfolio system introduced as part of the Council's new constitution.

The procedures outlined will help the Council to achieve a positive profile in the media, handle damage limitation and crisis communication more effectively, and achieve a more consistent approach to media communication.

This advice will also help Council employees to know what to do if they are contacted by the media, and will help Councillors and Council employees to understand how the Council communicates with the media.

Although this advice is quite detailed a quick reference guide has been included at Appendix 1.

New employees will receive a copy of this advice when they start and it also be included in Member induction packs. Existing employees and members will be signposted to this advice through Daily Message and Team Briefing.

For further information or advice, or to share your comments, please contact Nick Molyneux or Gillian Hoyle in the Communications Office on 01706 238603/04

Media Focus

The primary focus for the Council's media relations will be with the local media, although opportunities will be pursued to raise the council's profile at a regional and national level, through the internet, and in specialist 'trade' publications.

Positioning the council - media presentation

The Council should aim to present itself as:

- open, accessible and transparent
- listening to local people
- providing information about the Council's policies and services that will benefit local people
- wanting local people to understand the democratic process and feel more informed about the work of the Council and the decisions it makes
- a community leader and advocate for the community

- willing to apologise when things go wrong, able to learn from the experience, wanting to put things right and trying harder to be better in the future
- able to respond positively to criticism and to explain our position clearly
- decisive

Anticipating media interest

All Councillors and Council employees can assist in the Council’s media and public relations activity by notifying the Communications Office, at the earliest opportunity, of any issues that may be of interest to the media – both positive and negative issues.

Directors and Service Heads, in particular, should adopt a proactive approach to media issues. The checklist at Appendix 2 provides some useful pointers.

Front line staff can also encourage the people who benefit from our services to participate in publicity opportunities whenever appropriate and to act as case studies.

Environmental scanning will also take place to identify issues that may interest the media so that the Communications Manager, in consultation with Portfolio Holders and Heads of Service, can formulate appropriate internal and external (media and public relations) communication strategies.

For other official Council business, the following people should take a lead in identifying issues that may be of interest to the media:

Senior Management Team Meetings	Chief Executive
Operational Management Team	Deputy Chief Executive
Full Council	Council Leader, Chief Executive and relevant Portfolio Holders
Cabinet	Council Leader & Chief Executive
Other Council Committees	Committee Chairperson
Legal Issues	Head of Legal and Democratic Services
Financial Issues	Director of Resources

Timing of press releases

Advance notice about potential subjects for press releases helps the Communications Office to plan and organise the Council’s corporate communications and will ensure that the Council achieves the best possible media coverage.

In general terms, the Communications Office should be notified 10 days in advance about the subject for a possible press release. As the Rossendale Free Press is published on a Thursday afternoon each week this means that the Communications Office should be informed about a story on the preceding Monday.

Where it is not possible to give 10 days notice, ‘late’ requests should be made as soon as possible, and in any event, no later than 9am on the Tuesday preceding the publication of the Rossendale Free Press. The Communications Office will endeavor

to deal with all 'late' requests for press releases but cannot guarantee to produce a press release at very short notice.

Press releases which arrive at the Rossendale Free Press after Monday run the risk of being put on late pages, being substantially edited or held over for the following week.

Council Spokespeople - press releases

The media appreciate having a wide variety of spokespeople and experts to contact and feature.

Press releases should normally include a quote from the relevant Council officer and a relevant Councillor, except where, at the discretion of the Communications Office or a Director, this is deemed not appropriate (e.g. during an election period), or where the relevant Councillor declines to comment. If it is appropriate, every effort should be made to quote a service user who is/will benefit from the initiative that is the subject of the press release.

Quotes from Councillors should normally come from the relevant Portfolio Holder or from a Committee Chair if it falls within their remit. In addition, the Council Leader is considered to be a spokesperson on all Council issues, and he/she may, in agreement with the Communications Office or a Director, choose to put forward a fellow Councillor for media comment. On occasions, it may be the Group Leaders collectively who are featured.

Where press releases stem from Cabinet Decisions, the person quoted must reflect the decision, not the debate. Those Councillors who are opposed to the decision have the option of sending their own comments to the media, though they should consider that this may undermine the long-term credibility of the Council as a whole.

When providing information of a technical nature or about an issue that has not been through the Council's formal decision making process it is more likely that the person quoted will be a Council Officer.

Service Heads/nominated Council officers may be authorised by the Communications Office to speak to the media to explain or clarify 'technical' issues. They should not comment on 'policy' issues, other than to give details of what the policy is.

People who are quoted in Council press releases should give their consent before any quotes attributed to them can be used, unless they have waived this right previously in agreement with the Communications Office.

Press releases which have been requested by Councillors, or which quote Councillors should be checked by the relevant Council officer before being issued. If the issue is deemed controversial, this should be with a Director or Head of Service.

If it is necessary from a factual point of view for a press release to identify by name one or more of the political groups on the Council, then either a spokesperson for that political group(s) should be provided with the opportunity to comment in the press release issued on behalf of the Council or no politicians should be quoted at all.

Council Spokespeople - Radio and TV Interviews

Radio and television interviews are different to newspaper articles and they may only require one interviewee. Where this is the case, the interview shall be directed to a Councillor, a Director, or a senior council officer taking account of availability, knowledge of the issue, and whether they have received formal media training.

Wherever possible, local people who are affected by the issue or benefit from Council services should be included in the interview to show the Council in a positive light.

Role of members of the Cabinet from minority groups

The relevant Portfolio Holder will normally be quoted in Council press releases except where they oppose a decision that has been made through a majority decision making process. If a Portfolio Holder is not willing to be quoted supporting a decision that has been made through a majority decision making process, an alternative spokesperson will be identified as directed by the Council Leader, the Deputy Leader, or a Director.

Photo opportunities

Photographic opportunities often arise at short notice. Every effort will be made to accommodate the relevant Councillors, but the opportunity to publicise the Council's achievements should not be lost if someone is not available at a particular time.

Opportunities to enable the Mayor to become more "interactive" in photo opportunities will be pursued whilst still respecting the Mayoral protocol.

Launch Events/Media Receptions

Proposed dates for launch events or photocalls should be discussed with the Communications Office before any arrangements are made so as to ensure that they do not conflict with other Council business.

Contact details in media releases

All press releases should carry the contact details of the person who issued the release (usually a member of the Communication Office).

Councillors' contact details will only be issued to the media by prior arrangement with the Communications Office.

Circulating Press Releases

All proactive Press releases should be circulated to all Councillors (who use email) and posted on the Council's Website.

Managing 'difficult' issues

The Council has to respond to negative issues from time to time. It is important that we do not evade the media when there are difficult issues to tackle. At these times, regular communication will ensure greater public and media understanding of the issues, and fairer, more balanced, media coverage. If difficult issues are dealt with in a positive way we can minimise the damage to the Council's reputation.

The Council's Communications Office can provide confidential advice on how to handle sensitive, significant, controversial or confidential issues both internally within the council, and externally to the media, other stakeholders and the public.

Council Officers, particularly Directors and Heads of Service should alert the Communications Office as soon as they identify a potentially damaging/negative issue.

An appropriate position statement or response should then be agreed with the Communications Office, ideally before the issue becomes public.

The Communications Office can also ensure that Council spokespeople are available and fully briefed to handle media enquiries, and that a range of Council spokespeople are able to maintain a consistent message during challenging events.

Responding to inaccurate and critical media coverage

The Council should respond in the most effective and appropriate way by considering a range of options including: personal contact, a personal letter to the editor, an open letter (for publication), or legal advice.

Council employees must respond quickly to requests for information from the Communications Office so that an accurate and full response can be made to inaccurate or critical news reports or letters on the letter page. If you have been asked to respond through the letters page, the response should be provided within 2 working days in order for it to be effective.

The Council's position in relation to challenging issues will be communicated to employees and Members through a range of internal communication channels including Daily Message emails.

Inaccurate reporting

The Council should make every effort to correct inaccurate reporting of Council issues.

Unjustified criticism

Where a criticism is unjustified, it creates a negative image of the Council and damages employee morale if we do not respond. Our response should seek to set the record straight by outlining the facts of the case, rebutting any allegations that have been made, factually stating the Council's policy or point of view, and offering to provide a further detailed explanation or meet with the person who has made the

criticism. The response should not be unduly witty, sarcastic, aggressive or patronising.

Justified criticism

Where the criticism is justified, we should seek to provide an apology and/or an explanation of what has happened. We should then outline the action we intend to take to avoid a similar situation happening again.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Press releases regarding Overview and Scrutiny issues should quote extracts from the report along with quotes from the Chair of the Committee and a corporate response provided by the Council Leader or Chief Executive.

Deadlines

Members and employees should be aware that the media work to tight deadlines. It is important that media enquiries are quickly directed to the Communications Office and that requests for information are processed as quickly as possible. It is important to ascertain when the media's deadline is, and if a response cannot be provided within this timescale, to tell them as soon as possible.

Media coverage – impact on staff

Many employees base their perception of the Council on what they read in the paper. Good media coverage will have a positive impact on staff morale.

However, employee morale is damaged if staff find out about major Council decisions through the local newspaper, rather than being informed through official Council communication channels. Therefore, employees should be informed about significant Council issues at the same time, or as soon as possible after, the media have been informed. This will help Council employees to act as better ambassadors for the Council.

Staying within the Law

The Council's media communications must comply with the law – particularly the 1988 Local Government Act and its Code of Conduct on Local Government Publicity.

The Code outlaws publicity which 'appears to be designed to influence public support for a political party.' This means that references to Councillors and the Government must be politically neutral when they are issued from the Council. The appearance of the material, in particular whether it appears to effect support for a political party, is all important.

Political groups or individual Councillors may decide to issue their own media releases or carry out interviews with their own political slant, but these communications must not involve Council officers and must be issued from Councillors direct. Councillors

who are critical of the Council in the media should consider that this may undermine the long-term credibility of the Council as a whole.

Linkages

These media guidelines form part of the wider Communications Strategy and Customer Services Strategy for the Council.

For further information

The Right Side The Law – Campaigning With Confidence produced by the Local Government Information Unit. A reference copy is available from the Communications Office on 01706 238603.

A protocol on Member/Employee Relationships is included in the new Council Constitution and is available from Linda Fisher on 01706 252447 or from www.rossendale.gov.uk.

If you need further advice or have comments on communicating through the media please contact Nick Molyneux or Gillian Hoyle on 01706 238603.

Appendix 1 - Media Advice – A quick reference guide – 10 key points

It is vital that the Council handles all media enquiries in a co-ordinated way.

1. All media enquiries should be channelled through the Council's Communications Office.
2. Council employees who are approached by the media should politely refer the enquiry to the Council's Communications Office. If no one is available it should be referred to a Director or Head of Service.
3. Council employees should not speak to the media unless this has been agreed in advance with the Communications Office. If no one is available, a Director may authorise a member of staff to speak to the media.
4. Every employee can help to create a favourable impression of the Council. Ideas for generating positive media coverage are set out in Appendix 2. The Communications Office should be informed of any 'good news' stories relating to the Council's work and the services it provides. Employees can also help to identify good case studies.
5. It is inevitable that the Council and its employees will make mistakes from time to time which could harm the reputation of the Council. If you are aware of such an issue you should inform the Council's Communications Office. If the Council is justifiably criticised in the media we should not be afraid to apologise and put things right.
6. The media work to strict deadlines and the Communications Office may require information, comments and statements at very short notice. You should do your best to meet these deadlines.
7. All Council press releases, letters to newspapers, and quotations relating to Council business should be issued through the Communications Office so as to aid media monitoring.
8. Requests for press releases should ideally be made at least 10 days in advance of the date they need to appear in the newspaper.
9. Any dates for launches or events should be discussed with the Communication Office before firm arrangements are made, so as not to clash with other council business.
10. Any Councillor or Council employee who reads something about the Council that is misleading or unjustified should inform the Council's Communications Office to discuss an appropriate response.

Appendix 2 – Identifying potential subjects for Media Releases

Use this checklist to help you identify potentially positive publicity activities for the Council.

- **Significant noteworthy achievements or successes**
 - award and achievement schemes & presentations
 - external recognition of Council/employee achievement
 - major investment schemes/projects
 - new services/services expanding
 - successful grant application/sources of external funding
 - successful projects that are coming to an end
 - examples of successful employee development
 - progress on achieving BVPIs
 - examples of progress – statistical or qualitative
- **Feedback to customers and responding to issues raised through consultation exercises**
- **Case studies of local people who are benefiting from Council services and are willing to do media work (training and support provided)**
- **Numerical milestones**
 - number of customers 500, 1000, 5 000, 10 000, 50 000 etc
 - anniversaries of significant events or services e.g. 5th, 10th, 25th, 50th
- **Forthcoming events**
 - meetings (where there is likely to be interest from the public)
 - conferences for the public
 - consultation exercises
 - open days
 - cheque presentations
 - competitions
 - visiting delegations
 - project/strategy launches
 - exhibition and display events
 - new brochures/information literature
 - publicising grants schemes
 - campaigns
- **Commenting on external changes (policies or services) that affect local people (particularly adverse impacts)**
- **Examples of the Council/Councillors/Council employees going out of their way to help others and make a contribution to the wider community**
- **Quirky/Human interest stories**
 - employees with unusual hobbies
 - firsts – e.g. first female refuse collector
 - staff marrying each other
 - bizarre holiday locations/experience
 - staff having babies born on the same day
 - staff involved in charity fundraising efforts

NB The media are always interested in 'human interest' stories. These might not relate specifically to Council issues but are nevertheless an important tool in building up a positive image of the Council, its Members and employees, and making us appear 'human' to those outside the Council