



SOUTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

MEDIA RELATIONS PROTOCOL

SEPTEMBER 2013

1. AIM

- 1.1 The aim of the Media Relations Protocol is to establish an agreed protocol for managing and implementing the professional relationships, working practices and operational activity between South Ayrshire Council, its elected members and officers and representatives of the media whether local press, national media, broadcast media, specialist publications or online media.
- 1.2 It provides guidance and best practice advice regarding both proactive and reactive media relations, photo opportunities, and working with the media in the run-up to elections with a view to ensuring a corporate and consistent approach to working with the media at all times.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The media has an important role to play in ensuring local residents, partners, customers, visitors, stakeholders and potential residents, customers, visitors and stakeholders are well informed about South Ayrshire Council's policies, priorities, services, activities, vision and values.
- 2.2 The Council recognises the importance of this role and is committed to developing and maintaining positive and productive working relationships with the media at both a local and national level.

3. WHO AND WHAT DOES IT APPLY TO?

- 3.1 The protocol applies to all officers and elected members when speaking on behalf of the Council – for example, Council Leader, Provost, or Portfolio Holder – and when representing the Council on outside bodies and partnership organisations.
- 3.2 When speaking to the media on behalf of the Council, official spokespeople such as members and employees must reflect the Council's position in relation to all issues unless speaking in another official capacity, such as a trade union official.

4. THE LEGAL CONTEXT

- 4.1 Through the Local Government Act 1986, specific legislation exists governing the publicity activities of local authorities. Under Section 2 of the Act, it states that a local authority shall not "publish or assist others to publish material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party."
- 4.2 In addition, the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity is issued under section 4(1) of the Act and all publicity the Council produces – which includes news releases and statements issued to the media – should comply with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
- 4.3 The Code itself is contained within the 1988 Department of the Environment: Circular 20/88, which applied in England, Scotland and Wales when published. While there have since been updates to the Code for local authorities in England and Wales, the 1988 Code still applies within Scotland.
- 4.4 The key message contained within the Code – in addition to the political neutrality of Council publicity – is that publicity is a corporate function and so should reflect the Council's views at all times. Therefore, it is generally inappropriate to publicise individual Councillors,

unless acting on behalf of the Council as a whole – for example, Council Leader; Provost; Portfolio Holder.

5. PRINCIPLES

5.1 The following principles will apply to all dealings between the Council and the media:

- The Council's communications team – which is available as required 24 hours a day, seven days a week – will be the primary point of contact between the Council and the media for both proactive and reactive issues.
- Employees who are contacted by the media should immediately direct the query to the communications team.
- The communications team will represent and communicate the views of the Council at all times.
- The Council will be open and honest in all communications with the media, taking account of legal, privacy or commercial considerations.
- The Council will provide information to the media in a timely fashion.
- The Council will present information to the media in a clear, simple and user-friendly way.
- The Council will never say 'no comment'.

6. MEDIA RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

6.1 Proactive news announcements

- 6.1.1 Proactive news releases/announcements are used to publicise Council decisions, policies, events and activities and to give information on Council services. The Council generally makes news announcements via news releases and – where appropriate – media briefings.
- 6.1.2 News releases are issued regularly by the communications team to the local, professional/specialist and national print, broadcast and online media with the aim of increasing awareness and understanding among appropriate target audiences of the Council and its work.
- 6.1.3 Examples of the types of issues promoted via proactive news releases include Council/Panel decisions, the launch of a new policy or project, raising awareness of a particular issue or event, highlighting performance, and recognising civic achievements.
- 6.1.4 News announcements, where possible, should be planned in advance with the communications team – ideally allowing a minimum of 2-3 weeks lead-in time to allow for planning, scheduling, research, drafting and approvals.
- 6.1.5 All news releases will be drafted and issued on behalf of the Council by the communications team. Releases will be prepared using the appropriate corporate news release template and based on information provided by the relevant service, which is required to sign off the content before it is circulated for wider approval.
- 6.1.6 The draft news release will generally include a quote from a named elected member or, where appropriate, senior officer:

- The Provost, or nominated representative, will be quoted in news releases relating to civic and ceremonial matters.
 - For other news releases, the relevant elected member or officer will be quoted. This will usually be the Council Leader (for major and strategic issues) or Portfolio Holder (for relevant portfolio issues) but may also include political group leaders and independent Councillors as appropriate.
- 6.1.7 All quotes included in news releases will be cleared by the named individual to whom the quote is attributed. Where this cannot be achieved within the required timescales, the quote will be cleared with the Council Leader/Depute Leader or relevant Head of Service/Executive Director/Chief Executive.
- 6.1.8 All draft news releases will be circulated by the communications team for comment and approval to the Council Leader, relevant Portfolio Holder, Chief Executive, relevant Executive Director and/or Head of Service, the Head of Policy, Community Planning and Public Affairs, and the Communications Manager. Political group leaders will also be included in the circulation as appropriate.
- 6.1.9 Draft news releases will generally be circulated no less than 48 hours before they are due to issue, although exceptions may apply from time to time to meet media deadlines.
- 6.1.10 Where possible, news releases and media statements related to Council/Panel decisions will be drafted in advance of the meeting based on the details in the relevant Panel papers. These drafts will then be amended, if required, to take account of the discussions and decisions made.
- 6.1.11 News releases and media statements relating to decisions taken by South Ayrshire Council will be issued as soon as possible after the meeting. Information on decisions subject to the call-in procedure cannot be issued until either the call-in period has ended without action or a decision has been formalised either by the relevant Scrutiny Panel or Leadership Panel or Council.
- 6.1.12 Information on Council or Panel discussions from which the public have been excluded cannot be disclosed to the media unless authorised by the Council or Panel or the information has been made available under section 50B of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.
- 6.1.13 News releases issued to the media will be copied at the same time to all councillors for information. All news releases will be posted on the Council's website at www.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/news, which automatically posts the information to both the intranet and the Council's Twitter feed.
- 6.1.14 Media briefings provide a 'one-stop-shop' facility for the Council to announce a major news initiative/policy/project and provide opportunities for the media to come along for photograph and interview opportunities where the appropriate elected members and officers are available.
- 6.1.15 Media briefings require a longer lead-in time than news releases and must be set up and facilitated in conjunction with the communications team, who can advise whether a media briefing is required and recommend an appropriate format to maximise the potential for positive media coverage.
- 6.1.16 Media briefings will generally include representation at both political (Leader, Provost, Portfolio Holder) and operational (Chief Executive, Executive Director, Head of Service) levels.

6.1.17 The communications team will work with those facilitating media briefings to ensure they are fully prepared.

6.2 Photocalls and photography support

6.2.1 Photographs can really bring a news announcement to life and photocalls provide an opportunity for the Council to enhance its proactive media relations, providing a visual representation of a news story, with the potential to maximise media coverage.

6.2.2 The communications team will arrange all photocalls in conjunction with the relevant service and agree who should attend.

6.2.3 For photocalls organised by the Council, invites will be issued to the relevant officers and elected members as follows:

- The Provost, or nominated representative, will be invited to all photocalls related to civic and ceremonial matters.
- The Council Leader will be invited to all photocalls related to major or strategic announcements.
- The relevant Portfolio Holder(s) will be invited to all photocalls related to their portfolio areas.
- Where a news story/announcement has a particular local angle – for example, linked to an event, initiative or development within a specific ward – all ward members will be invited to attend. Due to the 'local' nature of these events – which is the reason for the invite to the photocall – substitute representation from another ward is not permitted if local members are unable to attend.

6.2.4 When a photocall is organised on behalf of the South Ayrshire Community Planning Board or its associated partnerships, invites will generally be extended to the elected members who serve on these bodies.

6.2.5 Invites to photocalls will generally be issued by the relevant service, who will collate and coordinate responses and advise the communications team. Electronic or email invites will be copied to all invitees when circulated with a deadline for confirming attendance. Only those who confirm attendance will be expected for the photocall.

6.2.6 Council publicity and communication material must remain neutral and impartial at all times. Participants in Council photocalls will be asked to remove any items they display such as emblems and badges that are deemed political or might otherwise express an opinion that could compromise this impartiality. If there is any doubt about whether a particular item might be deemed as problematic in terms of being displayed in a Council photograph then councillors should seek advice from the Monitoring Officer, the Head of Policy, Community Planning and Public Affairs or the Communications Manager.

6.2.7 Where a photograph is taken and an item is worn by a participant which compromises impartiality and where no other photograph of the event is available for use, the communication team will airbrush the item out prior to releasing the photograph. Where that occurs, the member will be advised of the action taken.

6.2.8 The communications team can, on occasion, provide photography support or arrange photography to support news announcements, where required. The cost of commissioning

external photographers and the images required will generally be covered by the service requesting the work. Services must also ensure permissions are in place for photographs to be taken.

- 6.2.9 Copyright for photographs taken by the communications team rests with the Council. When external photographers are commissioned, copyright stays with the photographer; however, the Council will ensure it has the freedom to use the images as required – for example, in Council publications, for issue to the media, on the Council website/intranet and in publicity material used to promote the Council.
- 6.2.10 Copies of photographs commissioned directly by services must be provided to a quality standard (with captions) to the communications team in a timeous fashion.
- 6.2.11 Photography used to highlight sensitive or controversial issues must have the explicit permission of those featured before use.
- 6.2.12 With the exception of stock images, photographs should only be held for use for two years – where there is doubt about the use of an image, permission should be sought even if within the two year period.

6.3 Media enquiries

- 6.3.1 The communications team is responsible for managing all Council media enquiries and is available 24 hours a day, seven days per week.
- 6.3.2 While the team has extensive media contacts and is generally the first port of call for the press, officers and Councillors may on occasion directly receive media enquiries on Council matters.
- 6.3.3 Elected members approached by the media for an official Council comment should be discussed with the communications team, who will provide advice, support and guidance on how best to respond.
- 6.3.4 Media enquiries received by officers should be directed to the communications team or to the on-call communications representative. Enquiries from professional/specialist media outlets that are factual and technical in nature can be answered by relevant officers directly, however the communications team must be kept informed.
- 6.3.5 Most media enquiries will require a quick response, particularly when originating from the national or broadcast media, and Council services are required to support the communications team to ensure the Council has the right of reply and provides an appropriate and accurate response within the required deadlines.
- 6.3.6 Media statements and responses will generally be attributed to either the relevant officer (in response to queries regarding operational matters) or elected member. With the approval of the Head of Policy, Community Planning and Public Affairs or the Communications Manager, statements may exceptionally be attributed to a Council spokesperson.
- 6.3.7 All quotes included in media responses will be cleared by the named individual to whom the quote is attributed. Where this cannot be achieved within the required timescales, the quote will be cleared with the Council Leader/Depute Leader or relevant Head of Service/Executive Director/Chief Executive.
- 6.3.8 Media enquiries that are deemed to be political will be referred to the Leader of the Council for a decision on whether the administration would like to respond politically. In line with the

Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, the communications team cannot provide support to issue political statements or news releases.

- 6.3.9 As part of our commitment to being open and transparent when responding to media enquiries, the Council will never say “no comment”. While there may be times when information cannot be released because of legal, privacy or commercial considerations, we should always explain this and provide a general comment on our policies/procedures.
- 6.3.10 ‘Off the record’ briefings should be avoided at all times as the information can still be used by the media – information can only be provided in this way with the approval of the Head of Policy, Community Planning and Public Affairs or the Communications Manager.
- 6.3.11 All media communication relating to incidents or emergencies will be managed by the communications team in line with the Civil Emergency Communication Plan.

6.4 Potential media issues

- 6.4.1 If officers are aware of any issues within their service that has the potential to become a media story, they should notify the communications team as soon as possible, even if out-of-hours.
- 6.4.2 The communications team can prepare draft media lines to take and provide support and guidance on managing the media issue and facilitating any broadcast media interest as required.

6.5 Publicity ahead of elections

- 6.5.1 Once a Notice of Election is called, there are strict guidelines in relation to any publicity and media activity undertaken by the Council from then until the day of the election itself.
- 6.5.2 These are detailed in the Council’s [pre-election period guidance](#), which applies to all elections and by-elections: South Ayrshire Council, European Parliament, Scottish Parliament and UK Parliament as well as referendums. The guidance states:

“Public and media statements (reactive and proactive) will continue to be made during a Council pre-election period. Great care should be taken to ensure that any content is clearly and directly relevant to the service or issue being discussed and reflects the Council’s agreed position. Unless exceptional circumstances apply, statements will be attributed to or delivered by the relevant Executive Director (or nominated chief officer) rather than elected members during the pre-election period.”

- 6.5.2 Based on this guidance, normal practice during an election period is for proactive news announcements and reactive media statements to include quotes from the relevant Chief Officer and no quotes from, or photographs of elected members, should be issued during this time. Further advice and guidance is available from the communications team.

6.6 Schools and the local media

- 6.6.1 Schools can continue to provide day-to-day information to the local media for their dedicated ‘school news’ sections. Information issued to the media should also be copied to the communications team.

- 6.6.2 Schools should consider whether any proposed items for the 'school news' columns have the potential to be developed into a bigger news story. Any such items should be discussed with the communications team as soon as possible.
- 6.6.3 Potential news stories for national and specialist media should be discussed with the communications team in the first instance.

6.7 Advertising

- 6.7.1 All advertising must be placed through the communications team to ensure we achieve best value and ensure consistency of the Council brand at all times. Graphic support to design and layout adverts can also be provided.

6.8 Filming/interviews

- 6.8.1 All filming requests must be directed to the communications team for consideration. Interview requests for comments from the Council must also be directed to the communications team for consideration.

7. MEDIA MONITORING

- 7.1 The communications team monitors media coverage relating to the Council and can provide support and advice on how to respond to any inaccuracies in the reported information.
- 7.2 The communications team manages the Council's licence with the Newspaper Licensing Agency (NLA) and holds electronic copies of press clippings of articles related to the Council. Under the terms of the NLA licence, no other copies of press articles can be produced.

8. CONTACTS

- 8.1 This protocol sets out a defined approach to South Ayrshire Council's contact with the media; however, it won't necessarily cover every eventuality. Further advice, information and support on media issues are available from the communications team 24 hours a day.

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