

Redditch Borough Council Media Relations Policy

(September 2009)

Acknowledgements:

Gloucester City Council media guidelines

Worcestershire County Council media relations protocols

1. Why we need to have a policy
2. The media
3. Role of the Communications Team
4. How we communicate with the media
5. Protocols for staff
6. Protocols for members

1. Why we need to have a media relations policy

There is plenty of evidence to show why Redditch Borough Council should take media relations seriously.

According to the Local Government Association, we should aim to improve media relations because:

- **Perceptions shaped by the media affect satisfaction ratings**
- **Positive coverage protects our reputation and 'brand'**
- **It demonstrates community leadership**
- **Good media coverage helps recruit and retain quality staff**
- **It helps with place shaping, promoting the area as a positive place to live and work in, as well as to visit**

Research by MORI has found residents often cite the local media as a key influence on their perceptions of their council.

MORI has also proved there is a direct link between residents' satisfaction ratings of their local authorities and the amount of information they receive.

2. The media

Items about Redditch Borough Council may appear in print, on the radio, on television and online.

Our primary media group is made up of organisations with whom we do the majority of our media relations business. They cover Redditch as a stated business aim and include the borough's two free weekly papers the *Redditch Advertiser* and the *Redditch Standard*, the daily *Birmingham Mail* and radio station BBC Hereford and Worcester. All of these organisations also have websites.

Our secondary media group includes organisations that also cover Redditch, but less frequently and usually only the bigger stories. This includes the regional television programmes BBC Midlands Today and Central News. Regional radio stations such as BRMB, BBC Radio WM, Touch FM and Kerrang! are also included, as are newspapers such as the *Worcester News*, the *Birmingham Post* and the *Sunday Mercury*.

There is also the trade media. This includes local authority publications such as *Local Government Chronicle* and *Municipal Journal*, and specialised magazines like *Inside Housing*.

A fourth media group consists of all other organisations that occasionally cover the borough. This group includes national daily and Sunday papers, national and international television stations and national radio stations.

There are also some on-line, service-specific news services such as www.letsrecycle.com and the BBC has experimented with local television broadcasts that can be viewed via broadband connections or through interactive digital stations.

We also need to reach media that targets a diverse audience, including from ethnic minority communities and disabled groups.

3. The Communications Team

The Communications Team is the first point of contact for **all** media enquiries.

There are two Media and Communications Officers within the team who co-ordinate the Council's media relations activity, with the support of the Communications and Marketing Manager. They will:

- Handle and log media enquiries, identifying who is best placed to deal with the enquiry and ensuring that responses get to the media by an agreed deadline (media deadlines can often be tight)
- Produce and issue press releases and operational notes on behalf of the Council
- Organise media briefings where appropriate
- Organise photocalls as appropriate
- Set up TV/radio interviews
- Establish and maintain positive working relationships with the media
- Ensure that the media are treated equally and fairly
- Attend Full Council and Executive Committee meetings to assist any media who are attending, and also subsequently brief those who are unable to attend
- Advise officers and councillors on media handling strategies
- Organise media training for officers and councillors
- Keep press cuttings up-to-date and available
- Monitor and evaluate media coverage
- Provide support in the event of an emergency

Identifying news stories

The Media and Communications Officers look ahead to identify positive news stories to publicise the aims, works and successes of the Council. These include important events in the democratic process (eg Council decisions, setting the budget, election results) and national public service announcements, such as CAA scores.

These will be identified by the Council's own Forward Plan, and through regular discussion with officers.

It is the responsibility of individual services to tell the Media Officers as early as possible about internally-generated opportunities for publicity that are not automatically flagged up, such as:

- A milestone in service provision (eg first anniversary of Home Choice)
- The beginning of a consultation exercise (eg 'My Home, My Future, My Choice')
- Endorsement of our work by a third party (eg Green Flag Awards for our parks)
- Refurbishment or improvement work (eg Environmental Enhancement Programme)
- The release of a new Council publication (Redditch official guide)
- The launch of campaigns/events (eg Hate Incident Reporting scheme)
- Additional funding for a service from other organisations
- Training courses (eg free procurement seminars)
- Warnings to residents

4. How we communicate with the media

Contact with the media can be **proactive**, when we inform them of Council activities and decisions or **reactive**, where we respond to their enquiries.

Proactive media relations

This can involve bad, as well as good news. The Council often has to make difficult decisions that will impact on the lives of residents and businesses. They must be informed of these decisions, even if there is potential for negative stories in the media. If we do nothing, someone else will inevitably bring the issue to the media's attention, which could result in damaging, inaccurate stories with possibly no response in return from the Council.

Press releases and operational notes

The Media and Communications Officers are involved in the creation and distribution of press releases. This involves drafting a release based on a briefing or revamping/checking background for a release drafted by officers.

Releases are then shared with the relevant officer to ensure they are satisfied with their content and forwarded to the appropriate service head or director for clearance. They then go to the relevant media.

Operational notes are brief and are sent to the media to inform them of briefings, launches and photo opportunities or to alert them to agenda items of interest at upcoming Council meetings.

Press releases on court cases

Due to contemporaneous reporting issues, releases involving fraudulent benefit claims, fly-tipping etc have to be cleared and issued within two days of a case ending. Quotations in court case press releases are made by Portfolio Holders but it is imperative that these are obtained on time in order to meet the strict time limits. Failure to do so will result in quotations coming from an officer or spokesperson.

Feature coverage

Feature articles/coverage are particularly favoured by county and regional lifestyle and business magazines, BBC local radio and TV magazine programmes. The Communications Team will seek out opportunities to gain feature coverage that `goes behind the scenes` eg work of the landscape team, how people can enjoy sport pre 2012, or support for businesses etc. With so much feature coverage being lifestyle, there are opportunities to show a more human face to the Council.

Trade press coverage

In the recent past, the Council has achieved coverage in housing and waste collection magazines. The Communications Team will target relevant trade publications magazines as well First, the MJ, The Councillor and PR Week to promote corporate activity. LG Communications and the Government's I&Dea website welcomes case studies from councils.

Media Briefings and press conferences

If a press release cannot do justice to the story being covered then the Media and Communications Officers will recommend a media briefing. These involve inviting the relevant media to a specially-arranged session. Here they can be briefed by an expert officer.

Media briefings have proven very successful when it comes to helping reporters understand complex issues that will run and run (such as the introduction of the Alternate Waste Collection).

Press conferences are held for major stories or announcements. They have a particular role to play in emergencies.

Online press office

The Communications Team has plans to set up an online press office on the Council's website. This will feature issued press releases, contact details, a protocol for working with the media, and useful information for journalists.

Reactive media relations

Unsolicited media enquiries are not always bad news. And it is important to remember that positive media coverage of the Council far outweighs the negative. But, as a Council, we are limited by laws and by budget. We deal with emotive issues such as housing, so it is inevitable that we will sometimes make decisions that make residents unhappy and that they will contact the media.

Unfortunately, the lines between fact and emotion can become blurred and the perception the public may take from stories in the media is not the view we would like them to take.

Any response to such an enquiry must be mindful of data protection issues and cover all the points which explain our decision, eg legal requirements, financial constraints, eligibility criteria.

Sometimes a story may run for several days, even weeks, especially where readers/viewers/listeners can comment. This can be a particular issue with blogging and social networking websites. There will come a time when further comment from the Council is fruitless and ideally the story `should be killed`. The Communications Team can advise in such situations.

Rebutting every single negative story can be a dangerous game to play and can seriously damage media relations. It is always best to be selective and seek to rebut the most damaging stories only.

The Council will **never** respond to an enquiry with “no comment.” This implies that we have something to hide.

Press statements

Statements are responses to specific media enquiries and are reactive. They can include comment through quotations. Statements need to be turned around quickly in accordance with media deadlines.

5. Protocols for staff

1. All media enquiries must be directed to the Media and Communications Officers as the first point of contact.
2. If a reporter contacts any officer directly, they must be referred back to the Media and Communications Officers. This is to ensure that call is logged and that the right officer (or councillor where appropriate) is contacted to deal with the enquiry.
3. The Media and Communications Officers will contact an appropriate officer to either talk to the reporter or to provide the information needed to respond to the query.
4. Officers should only speak to reporters or do interviews if they have been media trained. Interview and media handling guidance is available from the Communications Team.
5. Only the Chief Executive or Deputy Chief Executive may speak on behalf of the corporate Council, on issues of major importance or controversy.
6. To avoid a 'no comment' situation, the Communications Team may give a holding statement to the press in the absence of any appropriate spokesperson.
7. All press releases, statements, briefings and photo calls should be issued or arranged by the Media and Communications Officers.
8. Any press releases concerning matters which may affect staff in any significant way should only be issued after those affected have been informed by an appropriate Council source.
9. Individual services are responsible for informing Media and Communications Officers of any upcoming newsworthy events (both positive and negative) that are not flagged up on the Forward Plan. This should be done as far in advance as possible.
10. If officers become aware of any issues which may result in bad press for the Council, they should inform the press office as soon as possible. This will ensure that press office is ready to deal with any media enquiries that may follow and that appropriate officers and councillors are briefed.
11. In general, all staff have a duty not to bring the Council in to disrepute in the media.

6. Protocols for Members

1. Council media relations involving individual Councillors must conform to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. This is available from the Council's Monitoring Officer.
2. Members wishing to publicise themselves or their groups for political purposes must do so in an independent capacity without using Council resources.
3. The Communications Team will discuss controversial/crisis issues with Executive Members, as appropriate, before any news is released to the press.
4. Only the Council Leader, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holders (or in their absence another delegated member) may speak on behalf of the elected Council.
5. The Mayor may speak on behalf of the Council as its civic representative, without reference to policy or politics.
6. Only the Chair of a committee (or in their absence another delegated member of that committee) may speak on behalf of that committee.
7. Sometimes the media will make direct contact with a member delegated to speak on behalf of the Council. This is understandable as relations can be well established. However, it is imperative that members keep the Communications Team informed of discussions they have with the media on Council business.

Communications Team
September 2009