



LANCASTER CITY COUNCIL
Promoting City, Coast & Countryside

MEDIA GUIDELINES

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Aims and Objectives

The long-term aim of the Council's Communications Strategy is to build and maintain a positive reputation for Lancaster City Council in the eyes of the public, its Councillors and employees as well as key partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

In order to achieve this aim a key area of our focus is on the local media.

Research carried out by MVA in the Lancaster District in 2002 found:

- 71% of residents cited the local press as the main way in which they currently received information about the Council
- 22% cited local radio.

When asked how they would like to receive information about the Council the local media was the most popular choice, followed closely by Council leaflets through the door and a Council newspaper

The media therefore plays a huge role in informing residents about what the council does and how it spends their money. In return, it's important the city council communicates effectively with this key provider of public information.

In doing so our objectives are to:-

- enable the Council to be one which is open, accountable, accessible and which listens;
- give information about the Council's policies and services and the democratic process so people feel more informed about the work of the Council;
- build up the Council's role as community leader and advocate for the community;
- handle negative issues clearly and decisively. Where we feel criticism of the Council is unfair we should use opportunities available to explain our case, either to the editors or to the readers/listeners. In cases where we are wrong we should hold our hands up and move the story forwards eg explain how we have already addressed the issues;
- improve the employees' view of the Council. Many employees base their views of the Council on what they read in the paper. We recognise our staff can be our best ambassadors. Therefore, in addition to improvements in internal communications, it is vital that all external communication regarding the Council bears this factor in mind.

Of course, this will require input on various fronts and ties in with the wider Communications Strategy as well as the Consultation Strategy

This document sets out guidelines for:-

- 1. Dealing with media enquiries**
- 2. Generating media interest**
- 3. Developing relationships with the local media**
- 4. Managing negative issues**
- 5. Monitoring and evaluating the media coverage of the Council**
- 6. Providing media support to our partners**

1. Co-ordinating Media Enquiries

The Council should ensure that local citizens are informed about the Council's policies, services and decisions. It must be open and transparent in its dealings with the press.

The City Council receives approximately 1,200 enquiries from the media every year and issues approximately 500 press releases. It also organises dozens of press launches and photo opportunities. In order to co-ordinate and manage all of this activity it is important that it is all channelled through a central point, the Communications Office.

Media Enquiries - Officers

The Communications Officer, with support from the Communications Manager, will act as one-stop shop for all media enquiries. This will involve taking the enquiry, working with relevant Officers/Councillors to agree a response and then the Communications Team passing that response back to the relevant journalist.

Occasionally, the Communications Team will ask an Officer to talk directly with the media, for example to explain a technical issue or to give an in-depth background for a feature.

If you are approached for a comment by the media, other than on an occasion agreed with the Communications Team, please refer the journalist to the Communications Officer.

Media Enquiries – Councillors

Where the journalist requires a quote from a politician, the Communications Officer will inform them of the appropriate Cabinet Member/Overview and Scrutiny Board Chairman/Task Group Chairman or Committee Chairman

2. Generating Media Interest

There are a number of ways of generating media interest – press releases, press launches, photo opportunities etc. The most commonly used form is the press release

i) Press Releases

In co-operation with the Communications Officer, Services should adopt a proactive approach to issuing service-specific press releases.

Press Release writers should follow the Press Release Writing Guide available on the intranet.

Other than in exceptional circumstances all press releases should include just one quote (see below for guidance on who to quote).

Other than in exceptional circumstances all releases should be emailed to the Communications Officer who will place them on the corporate template and issue them to the relevant media via the Newsflash Media Monitoring system. The Communications Officer will also place them on the website and intranet.

All press releases, and any other form of communication with the media, should be cleared with the Communications Officer and, if appropriate, relevant Cabinet Members. In the case of matters relating to Overview and Scrutiny Function, Planning, Licensing and the Standards Committee, they should be cleared with the Communications Officer and relevant Chair.

All media enquiries relating to that press release should be channelled through the Communications Office who will work with the appropriate Officer to put together an agreed response.

Press Releases Ahead of Cabinet/Committee/Council Consideration

The media "pick up" many stories from agendas and reports ahead of meetings. Whilst it would be inappropriate to offer a "comment" by the Council ahead of quasi judicial meetings, such as Licensing and Planning, it is appropriate for:

- A Cabinet member who has submitted a report for the public part of a Cabinet meeting to issue a release or statement ahead of that meeting
- For the chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Budget and Performance Panel and Task Groups to issue a release or statement ahead of one of these meetings.

However these comments should be limited to providing information rather than anticipating an outcome or expressing a view as to a preferred outcome from the meeting.

It is also appropriate for Officers to issue a statement/s outlining a summary of a report. In this way reporters will be more likely to use the readily provided Council statement which provides a brief and accurate summary of a report or clarification of an issue.

Of course, there is no reason why a political group or political representative should not make a comment, should they wish to do so.

The Communications Officer and Service Heads will liaise before agendas and reports are issued to the media to discuss whether such an approach is required regarding specific items

Press Releases Following Cabinet/Overview and Scrutiny Committee/Task Group/Committee & Council Meetings

When relevant Corporate Directors, Service Heads, appropriate Cabinet members, chairs of Overview and Scrutiny, Budget and Performance, Task Groups and Committees and the Communications Officer will liaise at the report deadline stage to discuss issuing positive press releases following a meeting. It is important that press releases are issued to the media as soon as possible after the conclusion of a meeting - not normally more than 24 hours after the conclusion of a meeting. (See below for who should act as spokesperson).

Press Releases Requested by Councillors

It is perfectly acceptable for a Cabinet Member/Overview and Scrutiny Chairman, Task Group chair or Committee Chairman to request an Officer to produce a press release relating to their role outlined above.

However, Officers should not produce press releases for Councillors on individual ward or party political issues or in advance of a decision of a properly constituted councillor meeting.

Logos

The City Council Logo forms part of the Press Release template and therefore all Council press releases carry the Council logo and crest. However, when issuing a press release with a partner it may be appropriate to create another press release template carrying both the Council logo and the logo/s of the other partner/s involved.

Equal Opportunities and Race Equality Policies

When drafting press releases or selecting photographs, all Officers should be mindful of the Council's Equal Opportunities and Race Equality Policies
Publicity should avoid stereotyping of roles and should demonstrate the Council's commitment to providing equality of services and opportunities to people of either sex, any colour, sexuality, all races and people with disabilities

Advertisements and information about services should be circulated widely and, wherever necessary, communicated in appropriate community languages

ii) Who should act as official spokesperson?

Technical/Factual Information

When providing information of a technical/factual nature (such as planning technicalities, new Benefits policies) on a topic yet to go to Cabinet/Overview and Scrutiny/Committee/Council, which has been to one of the above or which does not go to any of them, it is appropriate to use an Officer

Commenting on an Issue

Where a comment is required on a subject that has been to Cabinet/Overview and Scrutiny/Task Group/Committee/Council then the relevant Cabinet Member, Overview and Scrutiny Chairman/Committee Chairman, Task Chairman or Council Chairman will normally act as the Council's Spokesman.

If the appropriate Member is not available/contactable for interview at the requested time it may be appropriate to use an Officer. In these circumstances Officers must clear this with the Communications Team before giving any interviews.

Partners

Where the Council is involved in issuing a press release as part of a partnership arrangement eg the Community Safety Partnership, the Partnership's arrangements for who to quote should be followed. This would normally be the Chair of that organisation. In the case of a press release being prepared on behalf of a number of partners it may be appropriate to offer each partner an opportunity to be quoted.

Political

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. Group Leaders contact details will normally be provided to the media on request and Political Groups will determine their own spokespersons

iii) Media Events/Launches/Receptions

Anyone organising an event to which the media is to be invited should liaise with the Communications Team in the first instance, providing details of times, venues and who is being invited. This will ensure that the no two events are taking place at the same time. In this way we will reduce the risk of spreading the media too thinly and maximise opportunities of gaining positive publicity. In addition it will ensure the Communications Team is fully up-to-speed in the event of any media enquiries.

Each occasion will require a different audience but, in general, one or more of a combination of the following would normally be invited: Cabinet Member, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Chairman of the Regulatory Board, Ward Councillor(s)

Guidelines to assist Officers setting up a media reception etc are available on the intranet. The Communications Team is also happy to help.

iv) Photo Opportunities

Creating Photo Opportunities

The general rule is that where photo opportunities arise the relevant Councillors are invited. Depending on the issue this could be one or a combination of the following: Cabinet Member, Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Chairman of the Regulatory Board, Ward Councillor(s).

However, our goal is to achieve positive publicity for the Council as a whole and therefore some degree of flexibility is necessary in order to achieve that goal.

For example, photographic opportunities often arise at short notice. By needing to contact the relevant Councillors to arrange a time when all can be present, there are times when a photo opportunity and therefore positive publicity may be lost

There are also times when it is appropriate to include Officers for photo opportunities (see examples below).

There are also times, depending on the story, when the photographer may wish to reduce or increase the number of people who'd normally be invited to take part in a photo opportunity.

Anyone organising a photo opportunity should liaise with the Communications Officer to discuss how it should be handled

Example a:

Photograph as a result of a Cabinet/Committee/Overview and Scrutiny/Regulatory Committee Meeting:

The appropriate Cabinet Member/s and Overview and Scrutiny Chairman/Task Group/Regulatory Committee Chairman would normally be invited.

Example b:

Large/high profile events eg Bus Station Launch, Millennium Bridge Launch etc. Appropriate Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen and Regulatory Committee Chairmen and Ward Councillor/s would normally be invited.

Example c:

Civic-related photo opportunities eg Council signing up to a charter/declaration/handling over a cheque/receiving a cheque etc. The Leader of the Council or appropriate Cabinet Member and the Mayor or Deputy Mayor should be invited to act as representative of the Council

Example d:

Quirky photo opportunity to highlight a Council story/not high profile issue eg Environment Co-ordinator distributing Local Agenda 21 Consultation by bike or launch of Town Hall Tours, Children's Festival – Officers and/or Leader of the Council or appropriate Cabinet Member would normally be invited

Details of any photo opportunities should also be cleared with the Communications Officer ahead of any invites being sent out to the media.

Taking Photos for the Media

On occasions the media will not be able to turn up to a photo opportunity but will accept contributed photographs. For advice about taking photographs for the media please contact the Communications Office. Similarly photographs should be submitted to the media via the Communications Office.

v) Campaigns/Sustained Coverage of Topic

The Service Head and the Communications Officer will liaise to discuss the potential for sustained coverage of topics eg Recycling, the Regeneration of Morecambe, Luneside East

By drawing up a media strategy/campaign on a particular topic the Council can pinpoint what particular aspect it wants coverage of and more accurately time when it wants any coverage to appear in the media

Such a campaign can be targeted generally at all/majority of the local media locally or it can be targeted at a specific newspaper/radio as a 'joint' Council/newspaper and/or radio campaign

vi) Success Stories

All Officers should play their part in keeping the Communications Officer up-to-date on success stories eg successful grant bid, completion of a project, employee development etc

vii) Human Interest Stories

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

Examples of human interest stories: Unusual hobbies of individuals, special achievement of an individual eg first woman refuse collector, member of staff marrying another member of staff, bizarre holiday location/experience, two sets of twins born to staff on same day etc

Officers and Councillors should take the initiative to inform the Communications Officer of relevant stories.

viii) Mayoral Publicity

The Communications Officer and Member Services will work closely to encourage increased publicity for mayoral activities. This will include:

The continued publication of the Weekly Mayoral List

A weekly press release highlighting the key events in greater detail - to be sent to all media

Asking the Mayor to alert us to any unusual/interesting experiences/incidents/events she comes across in her duties

Enabling the mayor to become more "interactive" in terms of photo opportunities whilst always recognising the need to maintain and follow the mayoral protocol

3. Developing Relationships with the Media

The City Council's Communications Team is in contact with a vast array of media from local papers to national and international television stations. However, the main day-to-day contact is with the local media:

Lancaster Guardian
Morecambe Visitor
Lancaster and Morecambe Citizen
Lancashire Evening Post
Westmorland Gazette
Bay Radio
Radio Lancashire
Granada Television
BBC North West
Virtual Net (local web based newspaper)

The Council's relationships with the local media are generally good. Take up of press releases is high and the percentage of media requests for Council comments is, on the whole, good and improving. However, it is important to maintain and develop our relations with the media and to be responsive to their changing needs.

i) Deadlines

If we want a chance of getting our side of the story included in the media it's imperative that we meet the deadlines we are given. Further information on the local media deadlines is available from the Communications Section of the Intranet, but a basic rule of thumb is that all Officers contacted by the Communications Team regarding a media enquiry should treat it as a priority.

ii) Meet the Media Events

An annual Meet the Media event will continue to be held to introduce new Cabinet Members/Review Board and Committee Chairmen to the media.

iii) Media Briefings/Press Launches

When relevant, media briefings should be arranged, to brief the press on an issue of importance to the public eg new Licensing Regulations, Comprehensive Performance Assessment, Budget etc. This will also provide an opportunity for lead Officers and Councillors to build relations with the media.

Officers organising a media briefing or press launch should liaise with the Communications Officer regarding the organisation of the event.

iv) Annual Media Survey

An annual survey of the local media will continue to be carried out to ascertain the media's views on the level of service the Council provides and to learn how they feel we could improve that service.

v) Councillor Contacts

A Council 'contacts' list of the Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members, Review Board Chairmen and Committee Chairmen will be prepared and circulated to the local media. Photographs of all Councillors will also be provided to the photography departments of the local media.

vi) Media Awareness Training

In-house Media Awareness Training courses are provided to all interested staff (please contact the Training Officer for more details). This helps to improve the overall quality of service provided by the Council to the media.

4. Managing Negative Issues

From time-to-time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that we 'manage' these situations so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

i) Alerting the Communications Team

When Management Team and/or Service Heads become aware of a potentially damaging/negative issue they should immediately alert the Communications Officer.

Service Heads and the Communications Officer should work together to prepare an appropriate position statement/response. Wherever possible this should be done ahead of a story breaking. The response can then be used, if the potentially damaging issue is to be used by the media. In order to ensure that the Council's position is outlined to Councillors, briefings on difficult issues should be circulated to appropriate Councillors and staff.

ii) Developing Database of Briefing Material

A database with briefing material on a wide range of issues will continue to be developed to assist this process.

iii) Briefing the Media

On occasion it may be necessary to brief the media personally or to hold a press briefing to 'manage' a breaking story. The Communications Manager will take a decision on this in conjunction with other relevant Officers

iv) Correcting Inaccurate Reporting

The Council should make every effort to correct inaccurate reporting of Council issues. Discussion with the Communications Officer should take place in order to examine the most appropriate form of action eg personal contact, personal letter to the editor, open letter, legal advice.

Officers should act as spokesperson on any factual information and the relevant Cabinet member should act as spokesperson should a comment be required.

Officers need to respond quickly to requests for information from the Communications Officer to provide an accurate and full briefing of an inaccurate report.

v) When the Council gets it wrong

Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In terms of damage limitation the best policy is generally to hold our hands up, apologise and draw a line under the episode by moving the story forward, outlining how we are going to/are already learning from error/how we are putting it right. This kind of situation should be handled in consultation with the Communications Officer

vi) Leaked Items

Occasionally 'confidential' Council items are 'leaked' to the media.

The Council policy is that normally it does not comment on leaked or confidential items.

However, if an item which is not 'confidential', but which has yet to go into the official public forum eg Cabinet/Review Boards/Council, is 'leaked' it may be appropriate for the Council to issue a comment. Each case will be judged individually.

In both scenarios the Communications Officer should be made aware and be involved in discussions on how to/whether to respond.

vii) Political Issues

There are occasions where an issue becomes 'political'. In these circumstances an official Council response will not be given but Political Groups can comment directly.

5. Monitoring and evaluating

The Communications Team will continually monitor the media perception of the Council using the aims and objectives set out under aims and objectives section (P2) and a media monitoring software system, Newsflash.

Reports of news coverage, how enquiries and releases have been used (positive, neutral or negative) will be circulated electronically to all Group Leaders, Group Administrators, Cabinet Members/Overview and Scrutiny Chairman and Committee Chairmen, individual members *upon request*, the Chief Executive, Directors and Service Heads on a twice weekly basis.

A more comprehensive report evaluating media coverage will be produced annually.

Detailed monitoring reports, specific to a service or subject, can be provided on request.

Press releases will also be circulated to the above list via e-mail regularly.

All press releases will continue to be posted on the Intranet and website as soon as they are issued.

Copies of all newspapers are available for viewing in the Communications Office. Cuttings of any national coverage or reports of any radio or television interviews should be passed to the Communications Office.