

# Media Protocol

**(Including editorial policy for the  
South Wilts Citizen and external publications)**

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	<i>Note: A nationally published code of recommended practice on local authority publicity covers all aspects of communication, including media relations and is available from the Corporate Marketing and Communications Team</i>	

## **I Introduction**

This is a protocol for Salisbury District Council officers and councillors who may come into contact with the media. It covers procedures and protocols on:

- media relations;
- the writing and issuing of press releases;
- procedures for releasing information to the media; and
- policies relating to the council's own magazine, The South Wilts Citizen.

### **1.1 Our strategic aim**

To recognise the value of the media in the council's core value of communicating information to the public, and to use the media effectively to communicate with key audiences about council services and policies.

### **1.2 Our policy statement**

Salisbury District Council recognises the value of the media as a means of communicating information and messages to the public. The council is committed to open government and a positive working relationship with the media. We will always be open, honest and proactive in our dealings with them. We appreciate that they have their job to do and respect the right of the media to report all views on any given topic. Salisbury District Council values the media as one of its key partners in communication and will forge strong professional links with local, regional and national media.

## **2 The role of the Marketing and Communications Team**

The Marketing and Communications team promotes and leads on all aspects of the council's corporate marketing, communications and PR activities. It also provides advice and support to service units on promoting their individual services. (see also specific reference to the role of the PR Officer throughout this document)

## **3 Media Relations Policy**

### **3.1 Working with the Media**

The council's media relations and press release service is managed by the Public Relations (PR) Officer and, in their absence, the Marketing and Communications Manager.

Every media enquiry must be used as a positive opportunity to get our message across to the public.

### **3.2 Who deals with the enquiry?**

Most media enquiries come directly to the PR Officer. It is the role of the PR Officer to deal with that enquiry and decide what is the best method of response. The response can sometimes be handled with a written statement but often a council spokesman is needed to speak to the media.

The PR Officer will contact the relevant officer and/or councillor to decide the best method of response. It is imperative that officers and councillors respond swiftly to the PR Officer's request to ensure a quick response to any media enquiry.

The media may contact officers or councillors directly. If the nature of the enquiry is straightforward, for example if the reporter is asking a question which only requires a factual answer, to ensure a swift response, the officer or councillor should answer it there and then. The PR Officer must be kept informed. (*reference: amendment I, Table I*)

However, if the enquiry is likely to be contentious, for example when the council is being criticised, the officer and or councillor should take the details of the journalist, the full nature of their enquiry and pass this on to the PR Officer who will liaise with the relevant officer and/or lead councillor in order to give the media an appropriate response.

(*reference: amendment I, Table I*)

### **3.3 Who should speak to the media on behalf of the council?**

#### **Councillors**

Members of the Cabinet will be required to speak to the media to explain policy decisions. The leader and deputy leader will be called on to speak on corporate and major issues. Portfolio holders and their deputies will be required to speak on issues that come under their remit.

Chairmen and vice-chairmen of area committees and the planning and regulatory committee will be required to speak to the media on committee decisions. For

example, if the media contact the PR Officer asking to speak to someone from the council on a recent decision a committee has taken, the PR Officer will expect the chairman of that committee to be available to the media (or in their absence the vice-chairman). Chairmen and vice-chairmen are encouraged to discuss any arranged media interview, with the PR Officer and other relevant technical officer(s).

The chairmen and vice-chairmen of Scrutiny Panels will speak to the media on issues that they raise and reviews that they are working on.

Group leaders will be required to speak on issues that supersede politics, for example obituaries.

**Note:** *Nothing in this protocol precludes councillors or political groups from speaking or contacting the media (this would include letters, faxes and e-mails). Councillors **must**, however, make it clear to the media whether they are speaking: (reference amendment 2, Table 2)*

- (a) *officially on behalf of the district council - in this case the PR Officer should be kept informed- ; or*
- (b) *officially on behalf of their particular political group (stating the name of that political group); or*
- (c) *personally as a ward councillor. (reference amendment 3, Table 1)*

*\*\*During elections, all publicity referring to a political party or anyone standing for election will be suspended between the publication of a notice of election and polling day. Councillors will not be quoted in press releases during this period unless it is a councillor holding a key political or civic position commenting on an emergency or an important event outside of the council's control and where there is a genuine need for a response by a Councillor*

## **Officers**

Officers will be required to speak to the media on projects and initiatives they have had a direct involvement in. This will be to answer questions of fact, technical information and their areas of expertise. Officers who have not received media training will not be expected to do live on-air interviews.

Service unit heads and senior management members may be required to speak to the media on major and corporate issues – particularly if a quick response is needed and a leading councillor is not available.

**Note:** *With a small council such as Salisbury it is possible that anyone could end up dealing with a media enquiry. It is important that the nature, priority and deadline of the enquiry be established in the first instance, together with all contact details of the journalist and that the PR Officer is informed; the PR Officer will then liaise with officers and/or leading councillors on an appropriate response.*

## **3.4 Partnerships**

Elected councillors and officers involved in partnership organisations may be required to speak to the media on behalf of the partnership. This should be led by the partnership but the Salisbury District Council PR Officer must be kept informed. The

appropriate portfolio holder and/or leader of the council can also comment on the district council's involvement.

### **3.5 Use of embargoes**

Embargoes will only be used when considered essential:

- When news releases are linked to a launch event;
- When an issue of confidentiality requires it; or
- When it is required by a third party (e.g. Stonehenge Master Plan partners).

**Note:** Embargoes are not legally enforceable and are adhered to by general local agreement.

Please inform the PR Officer of any instances of an embargo being broken.

### **3.6 'No comment'**

Whilst we should avoid being 'unavailable for comment' there are some occasions when it is inappropriate to comment. For example, when legal action is pending, where an issue relates to the personal affairs of an individual or where there is a need to respect the privacy of a complainant or someone being complained about.

Please advise the PR Officer when deciding if a 'no comment' stance is the most appropriate.

### **3.7 Emergencies**

When Salisbury District Council is working in an emergency situation, arrangements are put in place with the other agencies involved. A press officer from one or more of the agencies will be put in place to deal with the media. During an emergency clear guidance on who the media contacts are will be issued to officers and councillors.

#### **Out of office hours contact**

The PR Officer's work mobile number will be available with the control centre in case any member of the media contacts the council in the evenings or at weekends. The PR Officer will decide if the media needs a response. If a response is required she will contact the relevant Service Unit Head and/or lead councillor.

### **3.8 Bad news stories**

Our policy is for mistakes to be acknowledged and apologised for 'on behalf of the council' where appropriate and where we are able to do so. Any pro-active statements, or answers to media questions such as these, should be discussed and agreed with the relevant policy director, portfolio holder and the PR Officer.

**(reference amendment 4 Table 1)**

### **3.9 Negative media coverage**

There are occasions where the media coverage of a particular issue is negative. After discussion with PR Officer, lead councillor and relevant policy director, contact should be made with the media concerned to redress the balance. If we still believe subsequent reports are unfair or not based on fact a complaint should be made to the appropriate authority. **(reference amendment 5, Table 1)**

### **3.10 Respecting Confidentiality**

Occasionally issues come to the notice of the media that involve staff or councillors and aspects of their private lives or employment contracts. It is not the council's policy to comment upon such issues. Factual responses are permitted, for example - 'I can confirm that the employee is no longer in employment with Salisbury District Council, but am not prepared to discuss the situation in any greater detail'.

#### **Staff responsibility to protect the council's reputation**

Leaking of confidential information, exempt agenda items and minutes to the media – or public criticism of the council or individual officers or associates – is viewed seriously by the council. However it is recognised that there will be occasions where the employee unions wish to communicate particular comment to the media in relation to issues rather than individual cases, on behalf of itself and its members.

There are mechanisms for complaining about issues or situations arising in the workplace and individual employees should refer to the procedures laid out in the appropriate policies (e.g. grievance, dignity at work/harassment and appeals procedure, whistle blowing) available from Personnel. If in doubt about how to raise concerns or which policy would be most appropriate for their needs, employees should seek advice and guidance from the Personnel Unit.

**(reference amendment 6 - Table 1)**

### **3.11 Complaints about media coverage**

Complaints about media reporting should be referred to the Service Unit Head, Policy Director and PR Officer to discuss appropriate action.

When a letter in the press requires a response, there should be a discussion between lead councillor, lead officer and the PR Officer and a suitable reply sent in the name of the lead councillor, if thought appropriate.

Where the issue is more wide-ranging, corporate, or serious, it will be appropriate for the Leader and Chief Executive to work together on a suitable response.

## **4 Press Briefings**

Press briefings have three main purposes:

- To help explain a complex issue that will aid the media's understanding of the subject and more accurate reporting.
- To communicate an important story (good and bad news) that will attract media attention.
- To 'launch' an initiative, service or event.

Officers and lead councillors should liaise with the PR Officer on the organisation of a press briefing, who should attend and what topics should be covered.

**Note:** Press briefings do not preclude the media from approaching other council representatives for comment.

### **4.1 Media Launches**

Media launches are a very effective way of publicising major new initiatives or events and to attract as much press interest as possible. If a media launch is being planned the PR Officer should be brought into discussions at the earliest opportunity. The PR Officer can assist with ideas likely to attract the media, ensure that all of the relevant officers and councillors are fully involved and that any proposed launch date is suitable for both the council and the media.

## **5 Identifying and preparing information for the media**

### **5.1 Pro-active public relations**

Positive media coverage comes from positive pro-active media communications and the recognition of a good news story. It is essential that councillors and officers share all newsworthy issues (be they good or bad) with the PR Officer.

### **5.2 Identifying potential stories**

To help the council communicate and create a stronger identity with local residents it is vital that it takes every opportunity to communicate to them what it is doing especially good news stories. An excellent way of doing this is by issuing press releases.

## **6 Press Releases**

### **6.1 Press release content**

The main purpose of a council press release is to:

- Increase public awareness of services provided by the council and the functions it performs;
- Explain to residents and council tax payers the reasons for particular policies and priorities;



- Improve local accountability; and
- Publicise forthcoming events.

## **6.2 Who writes press releases?**

The PR Officer is responsible for writing and issuing **all** district council press releases, including press releases issued as a result of an official meeting of the district council. An official meeting of the council is any meeting, which has been set up to discuss or carry out business of the council.

Any service units, which need to promote a new initiative or event or need to issue a statement via a press release **must** contact the PR Officer who will do this for them.

Officers are encouraged to present a draft press release to the PR Officer who will ensure that the press release is approved by all relevant parties and issue it to the media. The PR Officer may re-write any draft that comes to her to ensure it fits with the corporate style of the council and suits the requirements of the media.

Issues arising from Scrutiny Panel decisions that require a press release will be written by the council's PR Officer. If it contradicts a Cabinet decision, the PR Officer will be required to also state the Cabinet's point of view.

**No Salisbury District Council press release should be issued to the media without coming through the Marketing and Communications team first.**

**Note to councillors:** Councillors and political groups may issue their own press releases **but** they must not use the council's official press release headed paper and must clearly state that the views expressed, are their personal views. (*reference amendment 7, Table 1*)

It would be helpful if the PR Officer is sent a copy of all press releases from councillors and political groups as the media may contact the PR Officer asking for a district council response.

### **6.2.1 Who should be quoted in a press release?**

Quotes are effective devices to make the press release more interesting to read and to back up the information in the press release.

In most cases the officer directly involved in the press release subject and the relevant portfolio holder will both be quoted. This gives the press both an operational and background viewpoint as well as the viewpoint of the council's ruling Cabinet.

In some cases it may be appropriate for just an officer or just a councillor to be quoted – and in a few instances where the press release is only aiming to provide a brief announcement or statement no quote is needed.

It is the PR Officer's role to decide which is the most appropriate.

### **6.2.2 Contact details on press releases**

There must be contact details on the press release to enable the media to go to someone for more information. This should include anyone quoted in the press release, however, it is essential that the officer and/or councillor let the PR Officer know if they are not going to be around at the time of the issuing of the press release. All contacts **must** make themselves available to the media for the first point of contact and let the PR Officer know when the media contacts them, and what the nature of the call was. *(reference amendment 8, Table 2)*

### **6.3 Stages of press release approval**

Before issuing a press release to the media the PR Officer will seek the approval from:

- Any quoted councillor/officers;
- Service Unit Head; and
- Originating officer (where there is one).

### **6.4 Court cases**

Salisbury District Council will occasionally launch prosecutions and will want to use successful outcomes of court cases to deliver a message to the public. The best way of doing this is by releasing the information to the media via a press release. It is imperative that all press releases about court cases are issued to the media at the earliest opportunity.

The PR Officer should be informed when court cases are coming up and the result of the court case as soon as possible - preferably the same day.

### **6.5 Press release distribution**

All news releases leaving the authority will be copied by the PR Officer to the:

- Leader of the Council;
- Deputy Leader of the Council;
- Other Group Leaders;
- Relevant portfolio holder;
- PA to the Chief Executive (on behalf of Management Team);
- Relevant SUH;
- Lead officer; and
- The web site.

### **6.6 Media records**

#### **Monitoring the effectiveness of media communication**

Records of press releases issued and press cuttings are kept by the Marketing and Communications team who also ensure they feature on the council's website.

It is the PR Officer's role to record the number of instances press releases are covered and to follow up, if necessary, any press reports.

A monitoring report of the media coverage of press releases will be made available in the members' room and a copy sent to the Management Team. A copy will also be available with the Corporate Marketing and Communications team for anyone else in the council who would wish to see it.

***(reference amendment 9, Table 1)***

### **Editorial policy for South Wiltshire Citizen and other publications**

#### **The South Wiltshire Citizen**

The PR Officer is the editor of the Citizen and is responsible for writing the articles that feature in the magazine. The Citizen is designed to feature more in-depth, human interest and behind the scenes articles about council services, council staff and the residents who benefit from those services. Although major policy decisions may still be reported in the Citizen, its main purpose is to provide balanced information about the council and not political propaganda. Articles may also feature about partner organisations and groups and organisations the council works closely with.

The PR Officer will work closely with service units on developing articles and article ideas. For each edition the PR Officer will issue an 'articles ideas list' to Service Unit Heads and Team Leaders who must circulate that list to their staff and come back to the PR Officer with article ideas. The PR Officer will then decide which of those ideas to include in the Citizen and arrange interviews and photographs. The PR Officer's editorial decision will ensure that there are a good mixture of articles that reflect most, if not all of, the council's six priorities: Improving customer service; delivering more affordable homes; maintaining our housing stock; improving transportation; improving waste management; and improving community safety. The council's core values will also be reflected in many of the articles. The Citizen will also reflect the urban and rural nature of the district.

When each article has been written the PR Officer will send it to the officers who lead on the particular project that is featured and the relevant Service Unit Head. If the article is about a councillor, or a councillor is quoted in the article, they too will get to see the article for their approval (Note: if the article is another version of an already approved press release this will not be sent to anyone for approval in the writing stages). The PR Officer will send all approved articles to the designers of the South Wilts Citizen.

Finished pages will be proof read by the PR Officer. Final approval of all articles is by the Chief Executive. Finished, designed pages will be sent to the Chief Executive a week before they are due to go to the printers and any changes he requests must be made.

The final approved pages will then be sent to the leader of the council and group leaders two days before the final print deadline for their information. However if the councillors spot any glaring errors or omissions then they must let the PR Officer know and the necessary changes will be made.

## **Editorial for external publications**

The PR Officer **must** see articles written by council officers or councillors that are destined to feature in external publications, if these articles relate to the council or the work of the council. This is to ensure that a consistent approach is taken towards the council's corporate identity.

Any publications, both external and internal, that feature articles on Salisbury District Council must be forwarded to the PR Officer. This is because the media may pick up on these publications and may wish to follow up an article about the council. If the PR Officer has the publication she can more easily help the media if they require assistance.