

West Wiltshire District Council

Cabinet

27 October 2004

Inclusion of Media Guidelines in Constitution

1. Purpose

This report informs the Cabinet of the development of Media Guidelines for the authority.

2. Development of the guidelines

The authority has developed media guidelines through a Corporate Communications Policy Project Group. The Group put the guidelines before the Standards Committee for consideration.

The Standards Committee considered the guidelines in its meeting of 20 May 2004 and resolved:-

“That the media guidelines set out in the Appendix to the report be approved as working guidelines for inclusion in the Constitution and that Cabinet be informed accordingly”

The guidelines are attached as Appendix 1. They contain details of their origin and links to appropriate Government guidance.

3. Consideration of the Guidelines.

It is helpful to have guidelines and their existence complies with recommended best practice. It is pleasing to report that the guidelines do not change the way the authority carries out its business as it already achieves the required standard. However it does document what we do, and makes public existing good practice.

If Cabinet agrees to the inclusion of the Guidelines within the Constitution this continues the current practice of putting helpful guides to the operation of the authority within the document which governs its business. The Media Guidelines would sit well within Section 25 of the constitution which is headed “Working Guidelines.”

4. Implications

Financial implications: There are no financial implications arising as a result of this report.

Legal issues: There are no legal implications arising as a result of this report.

Human rights. There are no human rights implications arising as a result of this report.

5. Recommendation

Cabinet are asked to agree that the Media Guidelines be included within the Constitution in accordance with this report.

Authors

Portfolio Holder(s)

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West Wiltshire District Council

Media Guidelines

June 2003

The government's Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authority Publicity requires communications units and press offices to be as objective as possible and to avoid issuing information which could be interpreted as party political or partisan.

This means that the press office can only represent the authority as a whole, and not the views of individual parties or members.

These guidelines interpret the requirements of the Code of Practice insofar as they apply to how we deal with the media. They aim to clarify how we handle media relations within the Council and who can talk to the media on behalf of the Council in both proactive (press office led) and reactive (media led) cases.

All officers and members can contact the press office for help and advice on any media issue. Within the limitations placed upon us, we will give as much support as we can - however, the Code of Practice may sometimes limit our involvement. Should this ever happen, we will advise you straightaway and, where possible, signpost you to someone who can help.

For further information, please contact:

- Bryan Walker, Corporate Communications Manager - 01225 770332
- Louise Knox, Communications Officer (Media) - 01225 770364

Media enquiries

The local media - newspapers, radio and television - is encouraged to direct all queries through the press office, which is part of Corporate Communications.

In the vast majority of cases, these queries are 'administrative' - seeking contact details for planning applicants, checking on the outcome of committee meetings, confirming that the Council is responsible for a certain area etc.

When a query needs a response on behalf of the Council, the press office will make a judgement about whether the issue is technical, political or local.

- **'Technical' queries** - for example, the progress of a PEL application, reasons for a planning refusal, follow-up information to a press release, or background to how a service is delivered on the ground.

Such enquiries will be dealt with either by the press office or an officer from the relevant service.

- **'Political' queries** - for example, seeking a response to criticism of the administration or individuals within it by the opposition party/parties.

Some queries will relate to specific policies or why a decision has been made. The press office can correct facts or issue explanations. If the line of questioning goes beyond this (i.e. if the query relates to specific debate between politicians or criticism of the policy by opposition members), it will be referred to the appropriate member.

Very often the media will approach members and officers directly. If you are unsure about answering the query, refer them to the press office.

Cabinet members can comment on issues arising from their specific portfolios, in consultation with the relevant service manager as appropriate.

The Leader provides the lead commentary on major political issues, such as the budget, and his/her own portfolio areas. He/she can speak on any other portfolio if that Cabinet member is unavailable. Equally, the **Deputy Leader** can comment on the same issues, in consultation with the Leader.

Committee chairs (including the internal and external overview committees) can comment on issues that arise from their meetings. In their absence, the vice chairs can be approached.

- **‘Local’ queries** - these are generally those where the Council is being asked to comment on something very localised or on a scheme run by another organisation.

Ward councillors can comment on issues relevant to their ward areas where not superseded by a Cabinet member - for example, local community planning initiatives, area committee grants etc.

The Chairman is the Council’s ‘first citizen’ and, as such, can comment on behalf of the district in relation to civic events etc (as can the **vice Chairman** in the Chairman’s absence). In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for the Chairman to comment on an emergency or national situation, such as the September 11 attacks or the death of the Queen Mother.

News releases

All news releases on behalf of the authority must be issued by the press office, in agreement with the relevant service manager and portfolio holder.

Wherever possible, news releases will include a quote from the relevant elected member (Leader, portfolio holder or Chairman). The service manager may also be quoted if appropriate.

If members would like a news release issued on a particular subject, please raise it with the relevant service manager who can then brief the press office.

Individual councillors and political parties can issue their own news releases, as long as they follow the guidance set out in the Council’s constitution. In particular, members must avoid using paper headed with the Council logo that might give the impression that it was an official Council release.

Summary of Guidance given in the Code of Practice

All publicity issued by the Council press office is subject to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

This Code states that the main purposes of local authority publicity are to:

- Increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs
- Allow local people to have a real and informed say about issues that affect them
- Explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities
- Improve local accountability

Publicity about individual councillors may include their contact details, the positions they hold in the Council (for example, committee chair or portfolio holder) and their responsibilities.

Information about their proposals, decisions and recommendations may only be publicised by the Council where it is relevant to their position and responsibilities.

All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and whilst it may acknowledge the part played by individual councillors as holders of particular positions, personalisation of issues or personal image making should be avoided.

In addition, the Code states that publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillors which are relevant to his/her position and responsibilities within the Council, and to put forward his/her justification in defence of them, this should not:

- Be done in party political terms;
- Use political slogans;
- Expressly advocate policies of a particular political party; or
- Directly attack the policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals.

For a full version of the Code of Practice, please contact Corporate Communications on ext. 332.