

MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define roles and responsibilities within the council for working with the media. It will also assist the media by clarifying the level of service they can expect regarding access to officers and members, provision of information and responses to enquiries. The policy deals with the day-to-day relationship between the council and the media and does not address how the council will work with the media in a crisis, for which separate guidelines are available.
- 1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with the media. The council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.
- 1.3 This policy is supported by a variety of guidelines for officers and members including interview techniques, drafting news releases, filming policy and working with the media in a crisis. It is also supported by a media training programme for officers and members.

2. Key aims of media relations

- 2.1 The council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. Local accountability relies upon a genuine understanding of the council's policies and the services it provides. The media – print, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services provided by the council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.
- 2.2 The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the council to account for its policies and actions. It is important that they have access to officers and members and to background information to assist them in this role. To balance this, the council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.
- 2.3 To summarise, the key aims of this policy are to work with the media to -
 - build up a relationship of trust and mutual understanding that will benefit both parties
 - explain the council's policies and services to the local community
 - communicate important public information messages
 - invigorate local democracy and enable people to participate in the work of the council
 - enhance the reputation of the council using the council's Values as the cornerstone

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3. Council Values

3.1 The council's Strategic Plan contains objectives for how it will promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of South Lakeland. The council has also adopted a number of values to underpin these objectives. Many of these values will help the council to work effectively with the media. They are to –

- Work in partnership to secure the well-being of those who live, work or visit the area
- Enable everyone to take part effectively in the activities of the council
- Recognise the diversity in the District
- Seek continuous improvement in everything we do
- Communicate effectively both internally and externally
- Value our staff as a good employer
- Ensure that equality exists throughout the organisation
- Ensure that sustainable principles are considered in all of our activities

3.2 In addition the council is committed to –

Honesty we will never knowingly mislead the public, media or staff on an issue or news story.

Transparency we promote openness and accessibility in our dealings with the media, whilst complying with the law and maintaining confidentiality when appropriate.

Balance information provided to the media will be objective, balanced, accurate, informative and timely.

Clarity all communications with the media will be written in plain English.

3.3 The council has adopted an Equal Opportunities Policy & Race Equality Scheme and all contacts with the media will abide by the council's commitment to providing equality of service and opportunity to all people regardless of ability, gender, colour, sexuality, ethnic origin or religion.

4. The legal framework

4.1 Law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The council must also have regard to the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy, in particular -

- "Any publicity describing the council's policies and aims [and the provision of services] should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both."
- "Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the council.....should be handled with particular care. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible, although councils should not oversimplify facts, issues or arguments."

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- “Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.”
 - “.....local authorities.....should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”
- 4.2 Other guidelines are available to support this policy, in particular the Institute of Public Relations Code of Conduct, which outlines the principles of good practice in the field of public relations.
- 4.3 The council has adopted the statutory Codes of Conduct for officers and members and all contacts with the media should be conducted on this basis. In particular, officers and members should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the council in all their dealings with the media.
- 4.4 Confidential documents, Part II reports and papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and appropriate action taken.
- 4.5 The Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires that local authorities produce a publication scheme specifying the information that the authority publishes or intends to publish. The publication scheme will be of direct relevance to the media by providing a clear picture of what is available when they are seeking information on behalf of the public. The scheme will also include the issuing of news releases.
- 4.6 The council reserves the right to withhold certain sensitive information concerning commercial transactions, for example the purchase and sale of land and property. This applies to the council’s own commercial interests and to the various parties involved in individual business transactions with the council. So, for example, to protect the council’s negotiating position, details of an offer made for the purchase of a property would not be revealed to the media. This area and other matters are guided by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Data Protection Act 1998 and exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.
- 4.7 When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from the council’s Solicitor before any response is made.
- 4.8 There are a number of personal privacy issues for officers and members that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information such as home address and telephone number (although member contact details are in the public domain), disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Human Resources Manager or Management Team before any response is made to the media.

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5. Attendance of the media at committee meetings

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 1972 requires that all committee agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request, five working days prior to the meeting. In practice, this is the case for all the local media. The media are encouraged to attend council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available. Copies of any late tabled items will be made available and the text of any formal speeches. The relevant members and officers will be available following committee meetings for comment or interview.
- 5.2 Any filming or taping of committee proceedings by the media must be with prior notice to the Chair of the particular meeting. It is helpful if advance warning of this can be made via the Communications Officer.
- 5.3 In common with all council's, certain agenda items, known as Part II items, are debated in a closed meeting. The guidelines covering which items will be heard in Part II are covered by the Local Government Act 1972 and are reinforced by the Council Constitution. Agenda papers must give the reason for their inclusion in Part II and members must vote to exclude the press and public from that part of the meeting. Following the completion of Part II items, members and officers can be approached for comment, however they must continue to respect the confidentiality issues referred to in paragraphs 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7 of this policy.

6. Guidance for members

- 6.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for members and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that council resources should not be used on publicising individual members unless it is relevant to the particular position they hold in the council. These extracts from the code illustrate the main points –
- “Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the council (for example, member of the Executive or Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors’ proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and.....personalisation of issues or personal image making should be avoided.”
 - “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 councillor which are relevant to her/his position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward her/his justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals.”
 - “The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.”

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- 6.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the council will not quote any councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether or not they are standing for election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the council. In this situation, members holding key political or civic positions should be able to comment.
- 6.3 The council has adopted the statutory Code of Conduct for members, the objective of which is to enhance and maintain the integrity of local government, which demands very high standards of personal conduct. A vital function of individual members is to challenge and question policies and service provision. However, in dealing with the media all members should be conscious that they are representatives of South Lakeland District Council and should therefore avoid making comments or participating in photo opportunities that may damage the long-term reputation of the council.
- 6.4 Members are advised to ensure they are properly briefed and guided by officers before talking to the media.

7. Responding to approaches from the media

- 7.1 The media contact the council for many different reasons, for example, to follow up a story after receiving agendas or minutes; to ask for the council position on a more general story affecting other authorities or organisations; to look for a local perspective on a national story; following a call from a member of the public; for an update on a long running story. These approaches are usually made by phone or in person, for example, following a committee meeting.
- 7.2 Local press and radio and TV stations may contact officers and members directly when preparing news stories. They include –
- Westmorland Gazette (including the South Lakes Citizen)
 - North West Evening Mail
 - Lakeland Echo
 - Lakeland Press Agency
 - BBC Radio Cumbria
 - Lakeland Radio
 - The Bay
 - Border TV
- 7.3 The Communications Officer will produce and update a list of key contacts for distribution to local press and radio and TV stations. The Communications Officer can also be contacted for preliminary discussions on any story or if a journalist or researcher is unsure who to approach for a comment.

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- 7.4 Approaches from all national press, radio or TV stations or specialist press should be directed to the Communications Officer who will discuss the nature of the story and then contact the appropriate officer or member asking them to respond.
- 7.5 All proposals for feature articles or more lengthy broadcast interviews or debates should be made through the Communications Officer.
- 7.6 Investigative journalism will usually involve requests for background information and statistics, often from the archives. If the material requested is public information then every effort should be made to assist the journalist or researcher. Again, their deadlines should be respected but if it will take time to compile the information then this should be made clear from the beginning. It will usually be necessary to provide information in addition to that which is requested in order to set the facts and figures in context. It is recommended that requests for detailed information of this nature, whether from the local or national media, are made through the Communications Officer.
- 7.7 It is not possible to provide hard and fast rules about who will speak to the media on behalf of the council in particular situations. The important considerations are that the person has the necessary facts and understanding, that they are available when required and that they can speak with some authority, using plain English.
- 7.8 The following general guidelines should be observed –

Situation	Recommended spokespeople
When committee papers have been distributed, but before the meeting	Management Team or Directors nominated officer
Immediately following Cabinet or Council	Leader, Portfolio Holder, Management Team or Directors nominated officer
Immediately following any other committee	Committee Chair, Management Team or Directors nominated officer
Complex and/or contentious policy or service provision issues	Cabinet, Management Team or Middle Management
Straightforward provision of information on non-contentious issues	Any officer or member who knows the facts

- 7.9 To ensure that the balance of committee debate is not compromised, members are encouraged not to speak to the media between the distribution of committee papers and the close of the meeting. Members should refrain from speaking to the media before Planning or Licensing Committee meetings due to the quasi-judicial nature of the proceedings.
- 7.10 To comply with the requirements of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, managers talking to the media in the lead-up to a committee should focus on the content of the report in question and the reasons for it being put before members. If necessary the arguments for and against should be clearly outlined. Any speculation about the outcome of the debate should be avoided.

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- 7.11 All members and officers should respond in a helpful manner to approaches from the media and with respect for their deadlines. Everyone in the media works to tight deadlines, but if necessary take five minutes to gather your thoughts and call back promptly. Always make it clear whether you are expressing your own opinions or those of the council.
- 7.12 It should never be appropriate to say “no comment” – if necessary provide a holding response or find someone who is in a better position to comment. If you agree to talk to the media as a representative of the council then expect to be named so make sure you provide your full name and job title or position on the council. If you are not comfortable with that in a particular situation then talk to your manager before you talk to the media.

8. Proactive publicity

- 8.1 To properly involve the community in the work of the council it is important that they are fully informed about the services provided and the reasons behind particular policy decisions. The council also has a duty to inform the public how their council tax is spent. Much research has been carried out over the years both nationally and locally which clearly demonstrates that most people are informed about the work of the council through the media.
- 8.2 As well as responding effectively and punctually to requests for information from the media it is important to be proactive in seeking out stories that provide a more rounded picture of the work that goes on behind the scenes. As the local media all receive copies of agenda papers, most of their approaches relate to items being discussed by committees. They are less likely to be aware of individual projects and initiatives, the receipt of grants, appointment of new staff, VIP visits, human interest stories etc.
- 8.3 It is important that we work with the media to communicate important public information messages such as environmental or public health warnings, planning guidelines, provision of information on waste management or recycling services, council run sports programmes etc.
- 8.4 All officers and members have a responsibility for bringing such stories to the attention of the Communications Officer and discussing how best to publicise them. News releases are one important method of passing information on to the media, however if the story is suitably newsworthy it may be worth discussing the possibility of a feature article or a broadcast interview or debate.
- 8.5 It is important to obtain advice from the Communications Officer on any issues that are likely to be complex or contentious or to be sustained for any length of time, preferably before the issue becomes public knowledge. In such a situation the Communications Officer will work with the relevant members and officers to produce a communications plan which will ensure that balanced, timely information is provided to keep all parties informed.
- 8.6 To help reporters understand the council and the district better, the Communications Officer will produce and maintain a handy facts and figures guide and co-ordinate the production of briefing notes on key issues.

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- 8.7 For some major issues it may be useful to run briefing sessions for the local media to give them a fuller understanding of the issues and to provide an opportunity for them to ask questions. Such sessions will be co-ordinated by the Communications Officer in consultation with the Management Team and the local media.
- 8.8 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. However, such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks.
- 8.9 Letters representing the views of the council should only be submitted by Cabinet members or the Chief Executive. If other members choose to use the letters page to express their own opinions on council policies they are strongly encouraged to check the facts first with the appropriate officer, Chief Executive, Leader of the Council or Chair of the appropriate committee. It should always be made absolutely clear whether the views put forward are those of the council or of an individual member. At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the council.

9. News releases

- 9.1 The purpose of a news release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the council's position on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of all officers and members to look for opportunities where the issuing of a news release may be beneficial.
- 9.2 Any officer or member may draft a news release, however they must all be issued via the Communications Officer in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section 4 are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the council and that the use of the release can be monitored. Advice and guidelines are available from the Communications Officer on the drafting of news releases.
- 9.3 The Communications Officer will draft any news releases relating to committee reports, following consultation with the Management Team.
- 9.4 News releases may be distributed to specialist media by departmental groups, however the corporate news release paper or email template must be used and advice taken from the Communications Officer.
- 9.5 There are no guarantees that a news release will be used by the media but the presentation of a newsworthy story and the adoption of the appropriate style will increase the chances. One important aspect of news releases is the use of quotations from officer or members. As with responding to media enquires, it is not possible to draw up any hard and fast rules about who should be quoted, however the guidelines shown above in paragraph 7.8 will assist. All news releases must be approved by the relevant manager or director before distribution.

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9.6 The protocol for issuing news releases is –

1. Identify potential news story
2. If necessary have preliminary discussion with the Communications Officer
3. Draft the text using the in-house guidelines
4. Email the text (unformatted) to the Communications Officer including a contact name for further information/interviews.
5. Communications Officer will check, suggest amendments if necessary and obtain approval from the relevant manager
6. Communications Officer will distribute the news release, copy to relevant members and officers and post on the Intranet and website
7. Communications Officer will monitor use of the news release

9.7 News releases for partnership projects require particular care and it is important that the draft text is agreed by all the relevant parties. The lead partner would normally issue the release but the particular role of South Lakeland District Council should be clearly stated and, if practical, a logo included.

10. Setting the record straight

10.1 The media are at liberty to report stories using any angle they feel is appropriate and we can only hope to influence them through continuing our good working relationships. Limitations of time and space mean that you should expect serious editing of your quote or interview. Assume that anything you say to a journalist will be reported. There is no such thing as 'off the record.'

10.2 There may be the rare occasion where you feel you have been misquoted or where important facts have not been accurately reported or where you feel the reporting has been particularly unfair. This can often be rectified using the 'corrections' column in a newspaper or, if the complaint is serious enough, by a short broadcast setting out the facts or apologising. This would normally be dealt with through discussions with the editor.

10.3 There are organisations that investigate complaints about the media. Newspapers must operate within the Press Complaints Commission code of conduct and TV and radio through the Broadcasting Standards Commission. However, making a complaint through these agencies would only be considered as a last resort.

10.4 In all cases where it is felt necessary to set the record straight advice should be taken from the Communications Officer before any action is taken.

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11. Media Evaluation

- 11.1 It is important to monitor how the council is represented by the media as this is how the local community will view the council. It is also important to have facts available to measure whether publicity targets are being achieved and to counter common misconceptions about media coverage. The Communications Officer will monitor local press coverage looking at the volume of articles, the tone, whether news releases are used etc. Members and officers should help to complete the picture by notifying the Communications Officer when they have taken part in a broadcast interview or if they have been interviewed for a specialist publication.
- 11.2 Targets will be set for media coverage as part of the Communications Strategy which links into the Strategic Plan and Business Plans. Regular reports on media coverage will be produced and distributed to members and managers and posted on the Intranet.

12. Advice and training

- 12.1 Advice on all aspects of media relations and publicity is available from the Communications Officer who will produce appropriate guidelines including media interview techniques and drafting news releases.
- 12.2 The Communications Officer will maintain a current list of media contacts, though some groups may wish to retain their own lists of specialist media contacts.
- 12.3 All members and officers who are expected to deal with the media must be trained to the appropriate level and the Leader and managers should ensure that this is carried out. The Human Resources Officer (Training) and Communications Officer will arrange suitable training courses.
- 12.4 All new members and officers should be made aware of this policy and how it affects them through induction and update programmes and through discussion with the Communications Officer.

13. Responsibilities and monitoring

- 13.1 It is the responsibility of all members and officers to ensure that effective media relations are maintained in order to achieve the aims set out in paragraph 2.3 In particular the Cabinet, Management Team and Middle Managers should lead by example by responding positively to requests for interviews, quotes or background information.
- 13.2 The implementation of this policy will be monitored by the Management Team in consultation with the Communications Officer.

14. Date of review

- 14.1 This policy will be reviewed in September 2007.

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