

Appendix One:

Media & Social Media Policy

August 2018

Media and Social Media Policy

Version Control Sheet

Title: Media and Social Media Policy

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1 Introduction

This policy outlines procedures for Mid Devon District Council officers and elected Members who may come into contact with the media. It supports the Council's **Communication Strategy**.

With the growth of social media, online versions of newspapers, blogging and citizen journalism, any media policy must now take into account both the traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio and TV) and online digital media (including websites, blogs and social media).

It explains processes in relation to: proactive media relations; dealing with media enquiries; and dealing with posts on social media. It also provides guidance on a range of other media-related issues.

1.1 Our strategic aim

To work closely with existing media, and to develop relationships with new media channels, to inform and engage the public about the work of the Council, ensuring the reputation of the Council is upheld and enhanced.

1.2 Our policy statement

Mid Devon District Council recognises the value of the media and social media, as a means of communicating information and messages to the public. We are committed to:

- transparent government;
- a positive working relationship with the media;
- always being open, honest and proactive in our dealings with the media and on social media, and;
- respecting the right of the media to report all views on any given topic.

2 Proactive media relations

Positive media coverage comes from pro-active media relations and the recognition of a good news story. Ideas for stories can come from both officers and elected Members. The drafting of press releases is undertaken primarily by the Communications team. Creative and editorial support is also offered to services; however they are free to submit their own drafts where appropriate sign-off has already been sought.

2.1 Press releases

Media coverage is predominantly generated through the publication and distribution of press releases to:

- Increase public awareness of services provided by the Council and the functions we perform
- Explain to residents and council taxpayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities
- Improve local accountability
- Publicise forthcoming events
- Encourage participation in public consultations
- Explain changes to services
- Explain how the Council is dealing with issues of particular interest to local communities
- Share good news

2.1.1 Press release content

For advice on writing a press release, see **Phoenix Portal >> Communication >> Media Relations:**

- [How to write a good press release](#)
- [Quick checklist when writing a press release](#)

Tip: Make sure that the relevant Cabinet Member(s) – and, for local issues, any Ward Members – are informed about what is happening and that a press release is being prepared (even if those Members are not actually quoted in the press release).

2.1.2 Who should be quoted in a press release?

Quote attribution depends on the nature of the press release, for example:

- The relevant Cabinet Member and the officer most directly involved in the subject may both be quoted – this gives the media a strategic/policy viewpoint, as well as the day-to-day operational viewpoint
- An officer
- A Member
- An external partner

If the press release provides only straightforward information, there's no need to include a quote.

2.1.3 Contact details on press releases

Only contact details for the Communications team are included in the 'ENDS' of all press releases for follow-up enquiries from the press. This is to prevent journalists from contacting officers directly with future enquiries and to ensure all contact with the press is directed through, and logged with Communications.

Specific contact details may only be included in relation to consultations, where a 'return path' is required for respondent enquiries.

Tip: Where a press release covers a specialist subject for which follow-up inquiries from the press can only be answered confidently by a specific officer or Member, he/she should ensure they're available for contact by the Communications team, the following few days after release

2.1.4 Press release approval

For press releases written by the Communications team, sign-off is sought from the relevant Group Manager and Cabinet Member. Where a press release has been written by a service directly, it's up to the author to agree sign-off with the relevant Service Manager or Group Manager and Cabinet Member before submitting to communications@middevon.gov.uk, for publication and distribution.

Before issuing to the media, the Communications team will undertake checks for spelling, language and grammar.

Tip: Depending on the complexity of the subject matter, various people may need to agree the wording of a press release, such as:

- Any quoted elected Member/officer(s)
- The relevant service manager
- The Chief Executive or Group Manager (for important corporate issues or important operational issues)
- The Leader of the Council or the relevant Cabinet Member (for important strategic issues or policy decisions)
- Relevant partner organisations

2.1.5 Press release distribution

Press releases from services which are time-sensitive and sent in advance, must contain *****EMBARGOED***** within the subject line, along with the specified date for release. Press releases must also be accompanied with an appropriate image at an industry standard resolution of ~300dpi. This is not only for publication online, but also for reprinting by the press, should they choose to cover the article.

All press releases are published onto the middevonnewscentre.info/ website and then distributed via email to all media contacts, town and parish councils, and internally to Group Managers, Members and Customer First for info.

Press releases are further promoted through:

- social media posts published on the corporate [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages, which link back to the story on middevonnewscentre.info/, and;
- via e-bulletin to GovDelivery subscribers subscribing to the Council's email subscription service.

An RSS feed displaying the 10 most recently published stories on middevonnewscentre.info/ is also displayed on the [Residents](#), [Business](#), [Your Council](#) and [Do It Online](#) homepages of the corporate middevon.gov.uk website.

2.2 Other ways of generating coverage

The Communications team can be consulted for advice on other aspects of media relations including:

- Planning media campaigns
- Setting up photo opportunities
- Media briefings and media launches
- Use of embargos (where the media is given advance notice but cannot publish until a specified date)
- Negotiating exclusives
- Negotiating special features
- Improving web pages to support publicity
- Making better use of social media
- Increasing citizen engagement through GovDelivery

3 Reputational issues

3.1 Imbalanced or inaccurate media coverage

When media coverage of a particular issue is unduly negative and imbalanced, services can liaise with the Communications & Engagement Manager about how best to try to redress the balance. Action taken in response may involve:

- A letter to the press
- A request for a correction
- Communications & Engagement Manager, Chief Executive and/or Leader to meet and discuss with the Editor
- Generating further media coverage to move the story on in a more positive way

If we judge the following coverage to still be unfair or not based on fact, a complaint may be made to the [Independent Press Standards Organisation](#).

3.2 Confidential information

Leaking of confidential information, exempt agenda items and minutes to the media, is viewed seriously by the Council. The [Freedom of Information Act 2000](#) (see also 4.3 below), allows certain information to be available on request to anyone including the media, unless the Council has a justifiable reason for not releasing it. Please refer to the [Freedom of information Policy](#) on SharePoint for further information.

Occasionally, issues come to the notice of the media that involve staff or Members and aspects of their private lives or employment contracts. Our policy is not to comment upon such issues. Factual responses are permitted, for example: *'I can confirm that the employee is no longer in employment with Mid Devon District Council, but I am not able to discuss the situation in any greater detail'*.

3.3 Issues relating to employee relations

It is recognised that there will be occasions where the Unions wish to 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 on SharePoint. 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 [Human Resources](#).

3.4 Protecting the Council's reputation

While it is recognised that opposition elected Members will want to comment on particular issues such as Council policies and decisions, neither officers nor Members should bring the Council into disrepute or publicly criticise individual officers or associates.

4 Media enquiries

Every media enquiry can be used as a positive opportunity to get a message across to the public. Failure to provide a response explaining 'our side of the story' is an opportunity missed to ensure the subsequent reporting is fair and balanced. Our preference is to provide a response rather than 'no comment', which can come across as aloof, uncaring or that we have something to hide. If, for some reason we cannot comment in detail, for example, in relation to case work which is ongoing, we can usually provide a general comment and an explanation as to why we cannot go into detail.

4.1 Points of contact for media enquiries

4.1.1 Communications

The press and media personnel are encouraged to contact the Communications team with any requests for comments, supporting information or interviews. Communications will liaise with the relevant Group Manager or service spokesperson to coordinate a response. The enquiry is also Cc'd to the relevant:

- generic department email;
- Cabinet Member;
- Leader of the Council (if controversial), and;
- Committee Chair (if in relation to an incident or comment made at a committee meeting).

The Communications team will ensure all statements received are well written and submitted within the media's deadline. Final statements will be appropriately attributed, ensuring staff names and job titles are correct. Care is also taken to ensure that direct contact details for staff are not disclosed in any replies sent to the press.

Where a response from the relevant service is outstanding, we will respond to acknowledge receipt of the journalist's enquiry and to ask whether he/she is willing to extend the deadline for their enquiry. If no one is available, we will reply stating that the appropriate officer is currently unavailable for comment.

All contact between the press and staff internally is documented on the media reporting system CommsFlow for future reference and month end analysis.

4.1.2 Officers and Members

The media may from time to time contact officers or Members directly. If the enquiry is straightforward, requiring only a factual answer, this can be answered there and then. However, the responding officer or Member must notify the Communications team to record the enquiry onto CommsFlow.

With the immediacy of news now being published predominantly online, Officers and Members should be aware of the urgent need to respond within the deadline set by the enquiring journalist. It is within our mutual interest to respond positively and on time. The forging of good relations with the press allows us to build favours and any future coverage will likely be more favourable, or at least less critical if the story is negative. Similarly, journalists will be more willing to amend or withdraw a story if it's been reported inaccurately.

Note: Nothing in this policy precludes Members or political groups from speaking to or contacting the media. Members should make it clear to the media whether they are speaking:

- officially on behalf of the council – in this case communications should be kept informed, *or*;
- officially on behalf of their particular political group, *or*;
- in a personal capacity.

Media training will be offered to all Members who are likely to be called on to speak to the media regularly.

4.2 Media interviews and comments

4.2.1 Officers

It is up to heads of service and group managers to make arrangements for which officers in their teams can act as a spokesperson to provide comments or be interviewed by journalists.

The relevant Cabinet Members, should be consulted for advice at any time and be involved in drafting any media statements or preparing for interviews that are highly controversial or where this is a significant reputational risk to the Council.

Officers are likely to be called on to comment on these issues:

Chief Executive / Leadership Team	Major corporate issues (and in situations where the Leader would normally respond but is not available within the timescale)
Group Managers	Corporate issues within their service areas (and in situations where the Cabinet Member would normally respond but is not available within the timescale)
Officers	To answer questions of fact and/or technical information within their areas of expertise and in relation to projects and initiatives they are involved in, but they will not be expected to do live on-air interviews unless they have received appropriate media training

4.2.2 Members

Members are likely to be called on to comment on these issues:

Leader	Strategic issues, key policy decisions, and other major corporate issues affecting the Council
Cabinet Members	Issues that come under their remit
Chairmen of PDGs	Issues their PDG is involved in
Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of committees	Recent committee decisions
Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Scrutiny	Issues that Scrutiny raise and reviews that they are working on
Local Ward Members	Issues of particular local concern
Group Leaders	Issues that transcend politics, for example obituaries

4.3 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests

Some media enquiries are submitted as FOI requests, in which case the Performance, Governance and Data Security team will coordinate the response. See [Freedom of Information Policy](#) in the Governance area on SharePoint.

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5 Social media

In addition to posting proactive stories on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), social media is now also used as a customer service channel, where we can respond directly to customers' questions, comments or complaints.

5.1 Main corporate accounts

The Communications team maintains and administers the corporate [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts. Where applicable, notifications in the form of questions, complaints and comments are dealt with directly by the Communications Officer. If the query is more complex, or concerns service policy, the relevant service is approached for information and guidance when forming an appropriate response.

Services should be aware there is no such thing as a 'deadline' on social media; customer expectation is for a quick response – certainly hours rather than days – and leaving a post (particularly a negative comment or complaint) unanswered for more than a few hours gives the impression we are ignoring it.

5.2 Other service-specific accounts

A number of services have their own specific social media accounts to include:

- Housing
- Community Safety Partnership
- Tiverton Pannier Market (Community Development)
- Electric Nights Streetfood (Community Development)
- Mid Devon Work & Play (Community Development)
- Leisure

Staff within these services respond to their own notifications, however with the use of Business Manager for Facebook, the Communications team can access and publish posts onto these pages, where urgent action is required and the relevant page editor is absent. (This does not apply to Twitter, for which there is no Business Manager equivalent). Any service wishing to set up a new social media account should discuss this with the Communications & Engagement Manager.

5.3 Dealing with detractors

When dealing with detractors, ALL page editors and administrators using social media business accounts should avoid getting into an argument or inflaming a discussion. Officers will try to help in the first instance; if the user continues to post without engaging our offer of help, their posts will be ignored.

5.4 Deleting abusive or discriminatory comments

As a general principle we do not attempt to moderate posts on social media, as to do so could also open us up to accusations of 'censorship'. However, we will remove any posts from our social media accounts that are abusive (for example, use of language or personal attacks on a particular named officer or Member) or discriminatory (for example, racist or homophobic) and we will also give the reason for deleting a post.

5.5 Social media guidelines

The following guidelines set out the responsibilities, standards of behaviour and provide guidance to employees and Members using social media in a professional capacity, and things to consider when using social media for personal purposes.

All employees and Members should be aware of and adhere to the following policies, whichever is applicable:

- [Dignity at Work](#)
- [Single Equality Scheme](#)
- [Member Code of Conduct](#)
- [Officer Code of Conduct](#)
- [Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk policy and procedures](#)

5.5.1 Do

- **be responsible and respectful** at all times by adhering to the existing policies listed above
- **trust yourself** to use social media – the Council already trusts you to send an email on behalf of the organisation and the same applies for social media
- check your **privacy** settings – understand who can see the information you publish and your personal information
- **chat** informally with other users – use language and tone of voice that's consistent with your target audience

- **credit** other people's work, ideas and links
- **respond** to all comments and private messages as quickly and honestly as possible. Be personal in your response – show empathy and a desire to find a resolution to problems where appropriate
- Drive the conversation **offline if it's sensitive** in nature or likely to escalate – ask the individual to message you privately with more details and include your name so the customer knows who he or she is talking to
- **listen** in on other pages to what's being said about the Council, its services and the local area, then join in on discussions, and;
- **share** helpful content and links signposting people to the appropriate service or authority to inform & grow your audience. If you're in any doubt about sharing any particular content, the best rule-of-thumb to follow is don't share it!
- **Seek [legal advice](#)**, it's there to help you
- **add value** by creating content that educates and spreads awareness about Council services. Include positive stories encountered whilst on the 'day job' and news-bites with perspective to show the human side to public services
- Align your posts with the **Council's purpose and values** as summarised in the [Corporate Plan 2016-20](#) and [Communications & Reputation Guidelines](#) (needs to be reviewed but still relevant)
- **seek permission** to publish any information, report or conversation that is not already in the public domain. Do not cite or reference customers, partners or suppliers without their approval
- **respect copyright** when linking to images or other online material – obtain owner permission and provide appropriate attribution when using images that aren't your own, and make sure you purchase the correct license for any stock images used
- respect the pre-election period known as '**Purdah**' (see local.gov.uk/our-support/purdah)
- **ask** your followers questions to glean valuable insights (but ensure there's a clear and resourced return path for respondents to leave their feedback and make sure you share the results with them)
- **monitor and evaluate** the success of your activity.

5.5.2 Don't

- post content which will **embarrass** the Council or yourself
- **reduce your credibility** by posting your every personal thought – especially if you're complaining
- **moderate posts** unless they are abusive – blocking someone or deleting their posts without just cause will incur accusations of “censorship”
- use council **jargon** or corporate speak
- **ignore comments** and private messages
- say anything you **cannot substantiate** – if you don't know the answer, let the individual know you're looking into the matter

- **argue** with customers or inflame a discussion
- refer customers to **another channel** such as email or telephone – if they've contacted you via Twitter, you should respond in kind. The exception would be sensitive topics such as comments in relation to Planning applications, etc.
- Follow or share **political opinions** or groups which could otherwise compromise the Council's impartial service to the government
- **broadcast** or talk at people. Users who post information which is mostly information-sharing have twice as many followers than those who post mostly relating to themselves
- **cover up** mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run
- disclose **personal information** – to do so would be in contravention of the [Information Security Incident Policy](#) and the social media platform's rules
- **assume** that social media will look after itself – you will need to invest time, enthusiasm and energy to make it work. And don't leave your accounts unattended for long spells
- **share your passwords** with anyone other than the Communications team.

5.6 Training

One-to-one staff or Member training to use Facebook and Twitter can be provided by the Communications team on request. Such requests should be emailed to communications@middevon.gov.uk. A new [Social Media Guide for Members and Staff](#) is also being written. In addition, an in-depth user guide written in-house specifically for Twitter is available to staff who have received the afore-mentioned training, see [Service User Guide for Twitter](#).

6 Other issues and special circumstances

6.1 Emergencies and out-of-hours contact

In the event of an emergency situation affecting multiple agencies, a Media Cell will be setup by the lead agency to manage communications and the press. For more information, please refer to the [Devon Emergency Planning Service \(DEPS\) Incident Response & Recovery Plan](#) on SharePoint.

In the event of the media contacting the Council outside normal office working hours and if deemed an emergency, contact details for the Communications & Engagement Manager and Communications, Web & Digital Systems Administrator are listed in [Part 5 of the DEPS Incident Response and Recovery Plan](#). The Communications & Engagement Manager will decide if and what response is required. If a response is required, she will contact the relevant officer (Chief Executive or head of service) and/or lead Member.

6.2 Court cases

The 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 issuing a press release, or prior notification to the media of an impending court case. The relevant Group Manager should be consulted.

6.3 Photography and child protection

As outlined in our [Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy and Procedures](#), Officers, Members and volunteers should be vigilant at all times. Any person using cameras or videos within Council premises and at events or activities which involve children and young people, should be approached and asked to complete a [Photography Consent Form](#) (see **SharePoint >> Communications >> External Communications**).

Guidance for commissioning professional photographers or inviting the press to cover council services, events and activities

- Ensure that you make your expectations clear in relation to child protection

- Check credentials of any photographers and organisations used
- Ensure identification is worn at all times, if they do not have their own – provide it
- Do not allow unsupervised access to children or young people or one-to-one photographic sessions
- Parents must be informed when photographs of their child or young person may be taken at activities or events, and parental consent forms need to be signed agreeing to this
- It is recommended that the names of children or young people should not be used in photographs or video footage, unless with the express permission of the child or young person's parent

6.4 Data protection

The [Data Protection Act 2018 \(DPA\)](#) determines the way in which we obtain, hold, use, release and dispose of personal information. Data which is protected should not be released to the media. For guidance, see [Data Protection Policy](#) or contact the Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security.

6.5 Elections

During elections, all publicity referring to a political party or anyone standing for election will – except as in the following paragraph – be suspended between the publication of a notice of election and polling day.

Members will not be quoted in press releases during this period unless it is a Member holding a key political or civic position commenting on an emergency or an important event outside the Council's control and where there is a genuine need for a response by a Member. For further information concerning the publicity restrictions observed by Local Authorities during the pre-election period known as 'purdah', please refer to local.gov.uk/our-support/purdah.

6.6 Filming, recording and use of social media at council meetings

All media, including radio and TV journalists, and members of the public may attend Council, Cabinet, PDG and committee meetings (apart from items

where the public is excluded). They may record, film or use social media before, during or after the meeting, so long as this does not distract from or interfere unduly with the smooth running of the meeting. Anyone proposing to film during the meeting is requested to make this known to the Chairman in advance. The Council also makes audio recordings of meetings.

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7 Media monitoring and evaluation

7.1 Monitoring

7.1.1 Newspaper mentions

The Communications team receives the following newspapers

- Tiverton Gazette
- Crediton Country Courier

Any articles referencing the Council, its staff or Members are summarised and sent to the Leadership Team, relevant Group Managers and Members for information. All papers are kept for 6 weeks in the Comms area at Phoenix House where they can be seen by Officers and Members.

7.1.2 Online mentions

The Communications Officer monitors the following news websites on a daily basis:

- [DevonLive](#)
- [Crediton Courier](#)
- [BBC News South West](#)

Links to any articles referencing the Council, its staff or Members are sent to the relevant Officers or Members for information.

For any printed or online reporting which is found to be baseless, either the Communications and Engagement Manager or relevant Group/Service Manager can decide whether any follow-up action is required in response (see also 3.1 above). Any coverage generated – whether from a press release or by responding to a media enquiry – is collated and reported monthly to the Leadership Team for evaluation.

7.2 Press cuttings

Because it is prohibitively expensive, we do not have the necessary NLA Media Access licence to permit us to photocopy or electronically scan press cuttings. Officers and Members should therefore not make or store any copies of press cuttings for any purpose, as to do so would be breaking

copyright law. The originals of articles may however be cut out from newspapers and kept.

7.3 Social media monitoring

The social media channels for the following groups are monitored daily:

- Reporters/journalists (both local and national)
- Media organisations (both local and national)
- Community news and forums

References to the Council or Members are flagged and reported as above.

7.4 Web Alerts

Monitoring of the web is undertaken automatically. The Communications, Web & Digital Systems Administrator has setup a Google Alerts account to detect changes in content for predefined search terms. Terms have been entered for the Council, its premises, ongoing plans/developments, and names of key staff, Members and vexatious complainers. Additional search terms are added as and when appropriate, or the need arises.

Any detections are automatically emailed to communications@middevon.gov.uk, then forwarded to the relevant staff and/or Members, as above.