

Mid Devon District Council

Media & Social Media Protocol

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Media and Social Media Protocol

Version Control Sheet

Title: **Media and Social Media Protocol**

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1 Introduction

This protocol 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 protocol 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 recognise the value of the media in communicating information to the public, and to use the media effectively to communicate key messages with a range of audiences – such as council tax payers, local businesses, town and parish councils, visitors to Mid Devon, partner organisations – about council services and policies.

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
- 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. Writing press releases for publication on the online Mid Devon Newscentre www.middevonnewscentre.info is the responsibility of each service (with the exception of certain corporate priority projects where the Communications & Reputation Manager takes on this responsibility). The Communications & Reputation Manager also offers support to services in all aspects of communication including traditional media and social media.

2.1 Press releases

The main way we generate media coverage is through issuing 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.

Services should have agreed areas within their remit that would be of interest to stakeholders where a press release should be considered – this includes aspects of the ‘day job’ that impact on local communities.

2.1.1 Press release content

For advice on writing a press release, see the Communications/Media Relations area of SharePoint for:

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

Tip: Make sure that relevant Members – for example, the Cabinet Member 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?

Quotes make the press release more interesting to read and back up the information in the main text of the press release. Who is quoted depends on the nature of the press release, for example:

- the relevant elected 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

... and when the press release is only to provide straightforward information, there is no need to include a quote.

2.1.3 Contact details on press releases

All press releases have Customer First as the contact point for more information for both journalists and members of the public. Customer First must therefore be made aware of any administration arrangements that they will need to carry out (for example, in relation to consultation exercises).

Other service-specific contacts may also be given, as appropriate.

Tip: If Members or officers other than Customer First are given as contacts, make sure they're around and contactable in the few days after the press release issued

2.1.4 Press release approval

It is up to heads of service and service managers to make arrangements for which officers within their teams can 'sign off' a press release ready for issue. Advice can be sought from the Communications & Reputation Manager if needed. Customer First staff are not responsible for checking or improving press release and will assume that once a press release comes through to communications@middevon.gov.uk it is ready for issue.

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 a head of service (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

Once press releases have been signed off as ready for issue, these are sent to communications@middevon.gov.uk together with a photograph where possible and with any instructions as to date of issue, deadlines etc.

Customer First publish press releases on the online Mid Devon Newscentre www.middevonnews.info and send an email with a hyperlink to the press release.

They will further promote stories with links back to Newscentre on:

- the corporate Twitter account <https://twitter.com/MidDevonDC>
- the corporate Facebook page <https://facebook.com/Middevon1>

The main website www.middevon.gov.uk also has a news feed with top stories from Newscentre displaying on the front page.

Press releases may also be used in the residents' publication *Mid Devon Talk*.

2.2 Other ways of generating coverage

The Communications & Reputation Manager 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.

3 Dealing with media enquiries

Every media enquiry – even ones that we might prefer not to have received! – can be used as a positive opportunity to get a message across to the public. Our preference is to make some response rather than ‘no comment’, which can come across as aloof, uncaring or like we have got something to hide. Even in situations where for some reason we cannot comment in detail, for example, in relation to a legal issue, we can usually make a general comment and explain why we cannot go into detail.

3.1 Points of contact for media enquiries

3.1.1 Customer First

The media are encouraged to contact Customer First by emailing communications@middevon.gov.uk or calling 01884 255255 as the first point of contact with any enquiries they have. Customer First phone team or the Communications & Reputation Manager log details of media enquiries on a media management database and then contact the relevant officers/ Members who can provide a comment or speak directly to the media.

3.1.2 Officers and Members

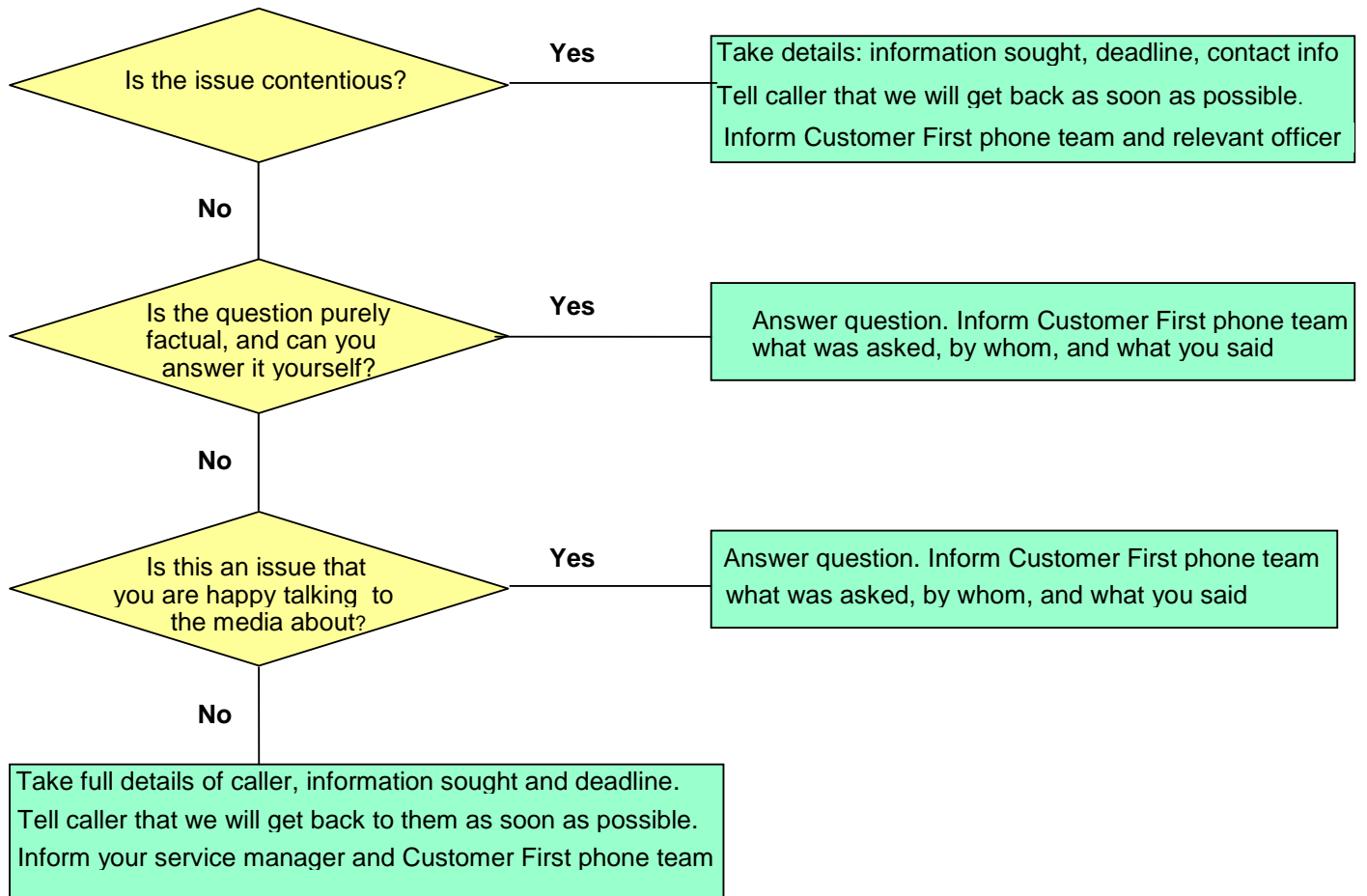
The media may from time to time contact officers or Members directly:

- if the enquiry is straightforward – for example if the reporter is asking a question that only requires a factual answer – these can be answered there and then
- if the enquiry is likely to be contentious, for example when the council is being criticised or where an issue is particularly controversial, an officer should take the details of the journalist together with the full nature of their enquiry and pass this on to the Communications & Reputation Manager who will liaise with them to give the media an appropriate response. Members are also encouraged to do this, although it is accepted that, in the spirit of democracy, some Members may contact or respond to the media without contact with the Communications & Reputation Manager.

See also the flowchart on the next page.

Officers and Members should be aware that deadlines for responding to media enquiries are often very tight. Even the weekly papers now have online versions, so stories are likely to appear quickly online.

If the media – newspapers, magazines, radio, TV or online – contact you directly ...



Don't feel pressured into making a statement straight away - better to wait and get it right than be quoted in a way that's bad for the council's image

3.2 Media interviews and comments

3.2.1 Officers

In a small council such as Mid Devon, it is quite possible that many officers could end up dealing with a media enquiry, and it is up to heads of service and service managers to make arrangements for which officers in their teams can provide comments or be interviewed by journalists.

The Communications & Reputation Manager does not need to be involved in all responses to media enquiries, but may be consulted for advice at any time and should definitely 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	Major corporate issues (and in situations where the Leader would normally respond but is not available within the timescale)
Heads of Service	Corporate issues within their service areas (and in situations where the Cabinet Member would normally respond but is not available within the timescale)
Service Managers	Likely to be the main media spokesperson for their service
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

3.2.2 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

Note: Nothing in this protocol precludes Members or political groups from speaking 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 Customer First phone team 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.

3.3 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests

Some media enquiries are submitted as FOI requests, in which case the Freedom of Information Officer (Information Management Assistant) will coordinate the response. The Communications & Reputation Manager can also be consulted if necessary. See [Freedom of Information Policy](#) in the ICT area of SharePoint.

4 Dealing with posts on social media

In addition to posting proactive stories on Twitter and Facebook, social media is now also used as a customer service channel, where we can respond directly to customers' questions, comments or complaints. See also [Social Media Policy](#) in the ICT area of SharePoint.

4.1. Main corporate accounts

Customer First monitors all council social media accounts for questions, complaints and comments that we may wish to respond to.

On the main corporate Twitter and Facebook account, if the Customer First team has the relevant information, they can post a response directly in the same way that they respond to customer enquiries by phone or by email.

If they need to contact another service, they contact the relevant officer in the same way that they would for a media enquiry. 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 that we are ignoring it.

Officers are encouraged to send their response to communications@middevon.gov.uk so that the Customer First team can pick it up and post it on social media.

4.2 Other service-specific accounts

A number of services (Housing; each of the three leisure centres; Tiverton Pannier Market; Community Safety Partnership) also have their own specific social media accounts. Officers within these services normally monitor and respond to posts, but Customer First can also access and post on these accounts if action needs to be taken quickly and no-one in the service is available. Any service wishing to set up a new social media presence should discuss this with the Communications & Reputation Manager.

4.3 Deleting abusive or discriminatory comments

As a general principle we do not attempt to moderate posts on social media, as to do so would be time-consuming and 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 Other issues and special circumstances

5.1 Emergencies and out-of-hours contact

When the 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.

The Communications & Reputation Manager's work mobile number and private mobile number are available with the emergency plan list of contact details in case any member of the media contacts the council in the evenings or at weekends and it is deemed as an emergency. The Communications & Reputation Manager will decide if the media needs a response. If a response is required he/she will contact the relevant officer (Chief Executive or head of service) and/or lead Member.

5.2 Imbalanced or inaccurate media coverage

When media coverage of a particular issue is unduly negative and imbalanced, services can liaise with the Communications & Reputation Manager about how best to try to redress the balance.

Complaints about inaccurate media reporting should be referred to the Communications & Reputation Manager to discuss appropriate action, which may involve:

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

If we still judge subsequent reports to be unfair, or not based on fact, a complaint may be made to the Press Complaints Commission.

5.3 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 (see also 3.3 above) does allow certain information to be available to any person

who requests such information including the media, unless the council has justifiable reasons for not releasing the information. See [Freedom of Information Policy](#) on SharePoint.

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 am not able to discuss the situation in any greater detail’.

5.4 Issues relating to employee relations

It is recognised that there will be occasions where the employee 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 (eg grievance, dignity at work/harassment and appeals procedure, whistle blowing) available from Human Resources. 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.

5.5 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.

5.6 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 releasing the information to the media via a press release or informing the media in advance of the date and venue of the court case. The Communications & Reputation Manager should be consulted.

5.7 Photography and child protection

As outlined in our Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy and Procedures (see website under Community Safety), officers, Members and volunteers should be vigilant at all times. Any person using cameras or videos within Mid Devon District Council services and at events or activities which involve children and young people should be approached and asked to complete a [Photography Consent Form](#) (see SharePoint under 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

5.8 Data protection

We have responsibilities under the Data Protection Act. This means that data which is protected should not be released to the media.

For guidance see [Data Protection Policy](#) in the ICT area of SharePoint or contact the Data Protection Officer.

5.9 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 of the council's control and where there is a genuine need for a response by a Member.

5.10 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) and 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.

6 Media monitoring and evaluation

6.1 Monitoring

We do not currently have the resources to undertake more than very basic monitoring of the effectiveness of media relations.

Customer First receives the following newspapers on a regular basis:

- Tiverton Gazette
- Culm Valley Gazette
- Crediton Gazette
- Mid Devon Star
- Crediton Country Courier
- Exeter Express & Echo

Any articles where the Council is mentioned are flagged up and the Communications & Reputation Manager assesses whether any follow-up action is required. Coverage generated – whether from a press release or by responding to a media enquiry – is logged on the media management database.

The papers are kept for three months in the Print Room at Phoenix House where they can be seen by officers and elected Members.

6.2 Press cuttings

Because it is prohibitively expensive, we do not have the necessary NLA 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.

6.3 Social media monitoring

The Customer First team receive direct notifications from Facebook and Twitter about posts/comments, and will also be developing more regular social media monitoring using online tools such as HootSuite.