



Publicity & Politics Protocol

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1. Introduction - Publicity & Politics Protocol

Law and national guidelines strictly regulate local government communications and publicity. All members and officers must follow these when communicating on behalf of the council.

The main purpose of local authority publicity is to increase public awareness of services, explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities and generally to improve public accountability.

This document sets out the guidelines the council must follow when communicating.

2. The content and style of publicity

Publicity material may be produced to:

- raise awareness of council services
- inform existing clients and attract new ones
- explain/justify the council's policies, generally or on specific topics — for example as a background to consultation
- to engage with the public and seek feedback on plans, policies or direction of travel

Publicity on the council's policies and aims must be objective, concentrating on facts.

Publicity issued by the council must not be political or associated with any political party.

The council will not comment on planning applications. The PR & Engagement Team will provide factual information relating to the process, but no comment will be provided on any application being determined by the council.

Using external agencies, individuals or consultants to provide services for marketing, publicity, public relations, public affairs or lobbying work is restricted.

Advice and approval must be sought from the PR & Engagement Manager, or relevant deputy, before commissioning or procuring any external work.

3. Communications for council officers

There is a Communications Handbook which governs how we communicate as an organisation.

[The handbook can be found on Staffnet.](#)

All council employees must adhere to the guidance within the handbook.

3.1 Council officers and the media

There may be occasions when it is appropriate for council officers to take part in media briefings, media conferences, media events or interviews on behalf of the council. Sometimes this will be together with a councillor/s and on other occasions it may be instead of a councillor/s, if an officer response is more appropriate.

Usually, officer spokespeople tend to be the senior management team or relevant head of service. However, for general or day to day issues, it is often more appropriate for

junior officers to act as spokespeople for particular subjects as and when needed, in discussion with the PR & Engagement Team.

It is recommended that staff take part in media training prior to conducting an interview or acting as a spokesperson in another way. A course on media awareness is provided by the PR & Engagement Team for all staff and full media training can be organised by the team for appropriate officers.

All officers who regularly act as spokespeople should complete annual media training, with participants to be agreed or suggested by the PR & Engagement Team.

Only officers authorised by the PR & Engagement Team are permitted to speak on behalf of the council.

Officers must not contact the media directly without express permission from the PR & Engagement Team.

If an officer is contacted by a member of the media they should refer them to the PR & Engagement Team immediately without making any comment on the matter in question.

For any questions about the above, please contact the PR & Engagement Team. The team operates a 24/7 rota for out of hours cover so there will always be someone available to help you if you have any queries. The normal office number and out of hours number is available on Staffnet in the PR & Engagement Team section. You can also email pressoff@gloucestershire.gov.uk or prandengagement@gloucestershire.gov.uk.

3.2 Media releases

Media releases can be requested by council officers but only those deemed to follow the guidelines below will be issued. GCC releases will **only** be issued by the PR & Engagement Team.

Service areas should provide information for drafting and sign off will always be sought by the PR & Engagement Team before the release is finalised and issued. **See Appendix for sign off process.**

The guidelines state that all releases **must** either:

- provide information on a service – e.g. new service, changes to services, improvements
- provide information on a council policy or performance – e.g. changes to how we do things, number of potholes filled
- provide information on the council budget and finances – e.g. council tax setting
- promote achievements of the council – e.g. savings made, awards won
- promote ongoing consultations – e.g. inform people how to have their say
- Provide safety messages – e.g. fire checks, trading standards

We will **not** issue media releases that:

- are political in nature or could be interpreted as political
- are on behalf of any political party
- are deemed not to be newsworthy by the PR & Engagement Team

If a media release request is accepted it will be given a priority rating, which on some occasions may mean the requester starting the draft themselves. If this happens full support will be provided.

The PR & Engagement Team will always have the final say on how a media release is presented. Providing there are no inaccuracies, the style of a media release will not be amended by the PR & Engagement Team without justifiable reason.

Media releases will always include a cabinet member quote as standard, though there may be occasions, where it is agreed by the PR & Engagement Team and cabinet member, to use only officer quotes.

Other councillors can be quoted in certain circumstances, see section 5.1.

3.3 Media enquiries

The PR & Engagement Team takes regular enquiries from the media, requesting responses for stories they are writing or wanting an interview. Deadlines are usually very tight and as most of the media have their own deadlines, they are often not negotiable.

The team will contact officers and councillors to gather information to write a response or to arrange an interview.

If you are contacted by any member of the PR & Engagement Team you must provide information requested as soon as possible. It is ok to share confidential information with the PR & Engagement Team; it will not be shared wider than those who need to know.

The council will never say 'no comment' so a holding statement would sometimes be issued if information for a response cannot be gathered in time but this is only ever a last resort.

If any officer is contacted by the media for a comment or response or interview, they must be directed to the PR & Engagement Team immediately without the officer providing any information or agreeing to anything.

3.4 The use of social media by officers

Gloucestershire County Council makes good use of social media with profiles established for Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. We are also exploring other platforms which may come online soon.

There is a separate [Social Media Policy](#) for business use. This covers how staff should conduct themselves when speaking on behalf of the council using these and other developing channels.

All officers must follow the guidance within the Social Media Policy at all times.

No officer is permitted to set up a new social media profile without express permission and support from the PR & Engagement Team.

If agreed, all accounts must be hosted within the council's social media management platform and this does incur a charge. Contact digital@gloucestershire.gov.uk for more information.

4. Campaigns

Campaign publicity is acceptable e.g. to promote services or to attract tourism or investment. The council will select corporate campaigns every year, based on the council's priorities.

Campaigns can also be used to influence behaviour or attitudes on matters such as health, crime, environmental issues and equal opportunities.

Considerable care is required where campaigns are mounted to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy or where an issue does not concern a specific function of the council.

The PR & Engagement Team will deliver or support corporate campaigns, in conjunction with the relevant service area however overall responsibility for the campaign remains with the service.

The PR & Engagement Team is available to provide advice on campaign planning and implementation of campaigns.

Advice and approval must be sought from the PR & Engagement Manager, or relevant deputy, before commissioning or procuring ANY external support.

The council must not organise or take part in any campaign intended to support or oppose a political party.

5. The role of councillors in communications

5.1 Councillors as spokespeople

Certain members of the council who have been designated with special responsibilities are authorised to speak on behalf of the council. They are:

- the leader
- cabinet members
- chair (or vice chairs) of committees.

These members can comment to the press, broadcast and other media, on all matters relating to their special responsibilities.

The leader and cabinet members individually and collectively hold executive (decision-making) positions. One of these will usually be the most appropriate member to comment, or be quoted in a council media release on executive functions. However, it is possible that situations may arise when a member who does not have cabinet or committee responsibilities may act as spokesperson. For example, a local member can speak on behalf of the council in response to a local issue if deemed appropriate by the PR & Engagement Team.

In addition to acting as council spokespeople, members with special responsibilities will also represent the council at official events such as openings and launches and at events run by partner agencies.

Only authorised councillors, as described above, can speak on behalf of the council though all members are free to give opinions on council business as an individual.

Comments on proposals should, when made by cabinet members, be relevant to their portfolio and refer to facts only.

Comments on proposals should, when made by cabinet or local members, be relevant to their project area or local issue, and refer to facts only.

5.2 Publicity for individual councillors

Publicity about individual councillors can include contact details, the positions they hold in the council (e.g. cabinet member or scrutiny committee chair, cabinet project champion, local member) and their responsibilities.

The code permits the publication of information about individual councillors' proposals and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council. In the case of local members, this would only apply when they are talking on behalf of the council **as described in 5.1.**

The PR & Engagement Team will provide advice and support to all councillors on communications issues, providing they relate to council business and are not party political.

5.3 Local councillors and GCC media releases

Local councillors will be invited to provide quotes for media releases issued by Gloucestershire County Council if the issue relates specifically to their division.

This does not include issues that affect more than one division or Gloucestershire-wide events held at venues within a particular division. *(An example of this is the Gloucestershire Flood Symposium, held at Kingsholm Rugby Club, where it is appropriate to quote a cabinet member, but not the local member as it isn't an issue specific to Westgate Division or roadworks on a major A route that runs through a division, but affects people countywide.)*

The code requires that any quotation must be factual and non-contentious. For example, "I welcome the decision to spend £... in my ward" or, "I will be expressing the views of my constituents at the council meeting". In all circumstances, publicity should be objective.

Local councillors who submit controversial, political or negative comment will be asked to amend their submission. In the absence of a response the comment will not be issued.

Every attempt will be made to contact a local member, however where local members are not available to provide a quote, the PR & Engagement Team will include the member's contact details at the bottom of the release for journalists to contact direct.

It is also appropriate for a member who has been promoting an issue to take credit for their work. As long as the publicity is about the policy and achievements, this will usually comply with the code. The justification for any proposals or recommendations must not be couched in party political terms, expressly advocating the policies of a particular political party or opposing those of another.

In summary, publicity must not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. While it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor that are relevant to their position and responsibilities in the council, this must not be done in party political terms and must not directly attack the policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals.

5.4 Web pages

Web pages that sit on Gloucestershire County Council website and give information about councillors **can** include links to the councillor's personal pages on another website, including web sites hosted by a political party.

GCC web pages cannot be used for:

- **the introduction of content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages**
- **the promotion of any political party or campaigning organisation**
- **the promotion of personal financial interests or commercial ventures**
- **campaigns that promote personal issues/subjects**

5.5 Social Media

All councillors are free to use social media platforms for their own publicity. Councillors are free to share views and information on council business, speaking as an individual, but not on behalf of the council. The PR & Engagement Team will provide basic training in setting up accounts. However ongoing training aimed at making the most of social media platforms will not be provided. There is a [helpful guide for councillors](#) in Members Matter (this is a password protected site for councillors).

Councillors must clearly identify their accounts as personal and not those set up as official GCC communications channels.

Councillors' social media accounts will not be administered by GCC staff either within or outside of the PR & Engagement Team.

6. Reporting of council meetings

6.1 Reporting cabinet decisions

Issues for discussion by cabinet will be published in advance on the council website. The agenda and papers for the meeting are made available to the media and public in advance.

The PR & Engagement Team will work with cabinet and lead officers to draft media releases that need to be issued before the meeting, in advance of the agenda.

Releases will be factual, outlining the decision, the context in which it was made, issues relating to it and any action to be taken. Any quotes included will relate to the member's council responsibility and will not be party political or personal.

The PR & Engagement Team will respond to press inquiries about decisions of cabinet. Every effort will be made to fulfil requests for interviews with cabinet members. Alternative and relevant officers may be asked to conduct interviews if the relevant cabinet member/s is not available.

6.2 Individual cabinet member decisions

Individual cabinet members can make decisions under delegated powers. The intention to make a decision is published as an item in the list of forthcoming executive decisions on the council's website at least 28 days before the decision will be taken unless subject to urgency measures.

Press releases can be issued once the item is published on the website, provided the following is included in the notes to editors:

There is a five working day period after the report has been published to allow for representations to be made to the relevant Cabinet member. Once the Cabinet member has taken the decision in the light of any representations received, the decision is then subject to a five working day 'call-in' period. If no call-in notice is lodged the decision is implemented on the 6th working day following the day the decision will be made.

The PR & Engagement Team will check with Democratic Services what stage the item is at before publishing anything.

6.3 Reporting of scrutiny meetings

The council has overview scrutiny committees which scrutinise all areas of the council's business.

Publicity about overview and scrutiny committees will only be produced in discussion with the chair.

Publicity will focus on factual information about the issue/s under scrutiny, those involved, how the process works and the recommendations made. It will explain the process for the recommendations being considered by cabinet.

The chair, or their nominated deputy, will be able to conduct interviews if requested and they will have final sign off on responses to journalist enquiries.

6.4 Reporting of call in

Decisions of the cabinet may be called in for further scrutiny by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. The committee will then discuss the points made and decide whether or not they can be upheld.

No release or comment will be issued when decisions are called in.

The PR & Engagement Team will confirm the call in process and outline the possible courses of action but no further comment will be made.

Once a decision is made, press releases will only focus on factual information about the issues called in, those involved, how the process works and the recommendations made by the committee.

If interview requests are received, discussions between the PR & Engagement Team and the chair of the committee that made the decision must take place to ascertain whether or not it is appropriate to take part.

6.5 Reporting the decisions of full council

The Full Council meets regularly to discuss the business of the authority. During this meeting there is usually extensive debate and discussion on agenda items, motions and questions asked by the public and members.

Any media releases issued following decisions taken at council will be factual, outlining the decision, the context in which it was made, issues relating to it and any action to be taken.

Any quotes included will relate to the member's council responsibility and will not be party political.

Where a motion has been put to full council, a release will only be produced if the motion is carried and all (main) political groups have included a quote or, if a quote is not wanted, agreed to the release being issued.

In these cases it is usually the proposer of the motion and the leader of the remaining political groups who are quoted though this is not essential. Media releases will not be issued for motions that have been defeated or in instances where there is not all party agreement to issue.

No media releases will be issued on any members or public questions asked during full council.

No media releases will be issued on any debate that takes place, unless it pertains to a decision or a successful motion under the criteria previously outlined.

Interviews following full council will only be facilitated by the PR & Engagement Team if they relate to a decision or successful motion as detailed above. These interviews will involve relevant members relating to the decision or motion.

However, all councillors are free to approach the media themselves to offer interviews on any items discussed during the meeting providing they are clear that they're talking as individuals not on behalf of the council.

7. Publicity in the run up to elections

When an election is approaching and once nominations close, the council enters the pre-election period, sometimes called Purdah. During this time, which is usually around six weeks prior to the election date and as soon as nominations close, the normal publicity and politics protocol does not apply.

In essence, during this period, GCC will not issue or organise any publicity concerning any councillor. This applies to all 53 members.

Publicity includes (but is not limited to):

- media releases
- statements
- photograph opportunities
- press conferences
- launch/opening events

Please see the [pre-election guidelines](#) for full details.

If there is a general election or if any of the district councils have elections, it should be business as usual for the council operationally, however we are more careful about publicity. See our guidelines on [how to work in the run up to local elections](#).

8. Party political publicity

All parties are of course free to issue their own releases. No council resources however must be used in their preparation or distribution. If council resources are used the publicity is covered by the restrictions on political neutrality in the 1986 Act and are subject to the Code.

Different rules apply in the case of political researchers, see below.

9. The role of political researchers

Section 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 permits the appointment of researchers for political groups. The purpose of the appointment must be to assist in the discharge of functions by members of a political group as members of the council.

Political researchers can support councillors in preparing media releases and responding to media enquiries for their group if they relate to members' work as councillors. Releases prepared in this way are not issued by the PR & Engagement Team or on behalf of the council.

Political researchers may not issue general media releases for the local/national political party or releases that aren't associated with the functions of the group on the council.

As good practice, copies of all media releases issued by the political researchers should be sent to the PR & Engagement Team for information. The releases will be filed and not shared with the other political groups, unless a media response is required from the governing administration.

10. Publicity with partners

GCC continuously works with public sector partners on joint communications. Examples are through the Local Resilience Forum or during an emergency.

However we are starting to work more closely with our partners for day to day business. We currently have working arrangements with Gloucester City Council for various activities. The PR & Engagement Team is also in constant contact with its counterparts within the six district councils, health and police to share good practice and explore joint working opportunities.

Occasionally officers from within partner organisations may contact GCC officers with a joint communication for issue. This is acceptable providing approval is sought from the relevant head of service or director.

Advice and approval must be sought from the PR & Engagement Team before any joint communication is issued by a GCC officer. However, there may be occasions, agreed following discussion with the PR & Engagement Team, where this is not applicable.

Requests for GCC to provide communications support for a public sector partner must be approved by the PR & Engagement Team before being agreed.

11. Publicity with MPs

The council will not issue or organise any publicity on behalf or concerning any MP.

However, from time to time the council may be invited to take part in publicity involving MPs, organised by them. There are guidelines that we must follow in these instances:

- The publicity (event) must not be party political
- The publicity (event) must not be contrary to any GCC policy, plan or agreed position
- The publicity must not take place during any pre-election period
- The publicity must not criticise or complain about any other MP

It is only ever appropriate for GCC branding to be used on any publicity created or issued by the MP when it is a joint initiative. *For example a drop in event for new parents – if this was organised and funded jointly by GCC and the MP then it is appropriate for joint branding to be used as it is essentially a council event.*

If it is an MP event, which GCC is simply attending, then GCC branding cannot be used. If in doubt, contact the PR & Engagement Team for clarification.

Quotes from MPs will not be included in any media releases issued by GCC's PR & Engagement Team.

12. Assistance to others for publicity

The principles set out above should also be taken into account when the local authority assists others with publicity. It can be appropriate for local authorities to help charities and voluntary organisations by arranging for pamphlets or other material produced and paid for by the organisation to be available for collection by the public in public libraries and other suitable locations.

Such material should not be party political and should not offend against any legal provision, but (subject to this) any such facility should be made available on a fair and equal basis.

Appendix

1. Communications sign off process

1.1 Media enquiries

- **Day to day technical enquiries or requests for basic information** – information to be sought from relevant officer and returned to the journalist. If the PR & Engagement Team deem appropriate, the enquiry may be sent onto the director or head of service or cabinet member for information.
- **Policy/wider/controversial issues** – information to be sought from relevant officer then signed off by head of service or director. Then onto the cabinet member for final approval.
- **Interview requests** – Cabinet to be offered interviews in the first instance. PR & Engagement Team to suggest relevant alternatives if cabinet not available.
- **Ruling administration political researcher to be informed of all controversial/significant enquiries. They may provide a steer on how the administration would like to handle the enquiry, however the PR & Engagement Team will have the final say on what is sent to cabinet for approval.**
- **Leader to be kept informed via political researcher, but specifically informed of any seriously controversial issues or any national political issues involving the council by the PR & Engagement Team.**
- **Chief Executive Officer to be informed of any seriously controversial issues or any national political issues involving the council by the PR & Engagement Team.**

1.1 Media releases

- **Day to day proactive media releases** – lead officer to sign off and cabinet member has final approval. Quotes to include relevant officer quote if wanted, but will always contain cabinet quote unless otherwise agreed with the relevant member.
- **Policy/wider/controversial press releases** – lead officer to check facts before release is sent to head of service and/or director for approval. Relevant cabinet member will then have final sign off. In extremely sensitive cases, the leader and chief executive will also need to give sign off.
- **Operational press releases** (ie: during snow/floods) – relevant officer approval and relevant cabinet member briefed.
- **Committee press releases** – relevant officer to check facts, sign off from relevant councillor/s (cabinet/chairman/vice-chair/group leader)

2. The legislation

The Local Government Act 1986

The main point of the act is:

A council must not publish any material that in whole or in part appears designed to affect support for a political party. It cannot give financial or other assistance to any other organisation to publish such political material.

The key test is:

- Does the material refer to a political party or persons identified with a political party or promote or oppose a point of view on a question of political controversy, which is identifiable as the view of one party and not another?

However, the following factors also need to be taken into account:

- The content and style of the material – there is a greater risk with material which seeks to persuade.
- The time and circumstances of publication and the likely effect on those to whom it is directed – there will be a different threshold for material issued close to an election.
- Where the material is part of a campaign the effect which the campaign appears designed to achieve.
- Material mentioning the name of a political party greatly increases the chance of it being seen as political.
- Strident language or emotive terminology is dangerous.
- Verbatim use of language in leaflets or press releases issued by a political party must be avoided.

Publicity designed to support a particular issue rather than a political party can be in breach of the act where the issue is one of political controversy supported by one party and not another or where the publicity appears designed to enhance one party or harm another.

Criticism or support for government policies (as opposed to the party of government) is not in itself unlawful. However, the more directly it is done, the more likely it is that a court would consider the publicity relates to the political party behind the constitutional body.

The council should also take care to ensure that official public statements can not be perceived as commentary on contentious areas of public policy.

This restriction applies to:

- members
- council employees
- other organisations and contractors communicating with the media or issuing publicity on the council's behalf
- communications issued jointly by the council with partners or by partners on behalf of the council
- other organisations issuing publicity with council funding (e.g. voluntary organisations) including information we display on their behalf

'Publicity' should be understood to include any communication addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public or any communication that will or may come in to the public domain, such as:

- newspapers – including statements and press releases issued by the council
- newsletters
- leaflets
- plans and publications including statutory and other plans
- posters
- campaigns
- advertising
- web site and other electronic publishing
- social media
- conferences and exhibitions
- consultation in any form
- general publicity information on t-shirts, carrier bags, badges.

Particular care must be taken to ensure that the communication is unambiguous, easy to understand, unlikely to cause needless concern, and personal details are not divulged.

Local authority agendas and minutes are excluded from the Act. However any secondary publication of a council decision is not.

The Code of Practice on Local Government Publicity

The Code of Practice gives more detailed guidance on principles of good practice. Councils are 'required to have regard to the provisions of any such code in coming to any decision on publicity.' The Code of Practice was revised in March 2011.

This states that publicity by local authorities should:

- be lawful
- be cost effective
- be objective
- be even-handed and appropriate
- have regard to equality and diversity
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity