

# **MORAY COUNCIL MEDIA STRATEGY CONTENTS**

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### **1) WHY GOOD MEDIA RELATIONS ARE IMPORTANT**

Residents' surveys across the country consistently show that most people's main source of information about councils is through the media – and, in particular, the local press.

This is a problem for councils who report a poor relationship with their local media or for those who invest little effort in pro-active media relations.

When asked how they would prefer to receive information about the council, residents say they would like information sent by the council direct to their doors – either in the form of a council magazine, newspaper or leaflet. Nevertheless, the local media still makes it into the top two or three indicators for how local people would prefer to receive information from the council.(source MORI).

Research by MORI has found residents often cite the local media as a key influence for why they hold some negative perceptions of their council. The company has also found a direct link between journalists' relationship with an organisation's communications team and the impact this can have on the slant of their articles. Generally, the better the relationship, the more positive the slant.

When the local media carries this much influence over residents' perceptions of their local council, it is vital the authority has a good relationship with the local press and the media. Effective media relations will not only help raise the council's profile and celebrate its achievements, but it will also help to limit the damage to bad news stories.

Ultimately, how well we manage our media relations will determine, to a large extent, the council's reputation.

## **2) THE MEDIA STRATEGY FOR MORAY COUNCIL**

The ultimate aim of all Moray Council's communications is to build, then protect, its reputation as a well-managed modern authority, providing people-led services to those who live, work and visit the area.

This is a corporate strategy for all staff and members, designed to ensure that the council achieves this strategic aim by recognising the value and importance of the media as a means of communicating information to the public.

The strategy will support the authority as it works to deliver the vision and priorities of the administration.

The media strategy aims to support the delivery of the council by:

- Enhancing the reputation of the council, by promoting and celebrating its successes and achievements, as well as those of its partners.
- Improving the public's understanding of the work of Moray Council, the services it provides and its aspirations for the future of the area.
- Providing a flow of public information.
- Underlining the council's role as a listening council, by stressing our commitment to consulting and empowering the public.
- Demonstrating the authority's commitment to transparent ways of working, by being as open with the media as possible.
- Defending the authority from unfounded criticism, by ensuring that the public is properly informed of all the relevant facts.
- Working to influence the content and tone of the reporting of Moray Council by taking a pro-active approach to media management.

In working to deliver these strategic aims, council members and staff agree to:

- Adhere to the corporate guidelines of a formal media protocol set out below, which will ensure a consistent, one-council approach to all our media relations.
- Forge strong professional links with local media outlets as appropriate to their responsibilities, as set out in the media protocol.
- Respect the right of the media to represent all views on any given issue.
- Act with honesty and integrity, as building up trust in what we say is an important part of maintaining our reputation as an authority.
- Promote the use of plain English, with all our communications being free from jargon and written in simple, accessible language.
- Adhere to media deadlines and try to deliver timely responses to enquiries
- Deal with all media fairly and not routinely favour one media source over another. However, we reserve the right to use the tactic of selected information release where it will best achieve our purpose.
- Avoid surprises.

### **3) MEDIA PROTOCOL: WHO DOES WHAT?**

The media protocol sets out how Moray Council will approach media relations. It identifies clear lines of responsibility among council staff and members for handling press enquiries and for working proactively with the media. It covers the basic procedures we should adhere to within specified situations and gives helpful hints and tips about media relations.

#### **i) Members**

Members have a key role in media relations. It is they who are ultimately responsible for Moray Council's media policy. The leading members of all the political parties on the council will be regularly consulted and briefed as required by the communications officer about the council's media relations.

The council's functions are discharged corporately. However, the convener, depute convener and committee chairs will often be approached by the media to comment on corporate issues. It is therefore essential that officers, whether in the communications section or in a particular service area, ensure that members are properly briefed for such situations should it be required.

All members are entitled to media training and guidance from the communications officer. A formal training package, which seeks to build on the existing skills of media communicators, is currently being developed and will be presented to committee shortly.

## **ii) The Central Management Team**

The CMT will be responsible for endorsing and overseeing the media strategy and protocol.

They will help lead by example by responding positively, whenever possible, to requests for interviews or quotes. They will also inform the communications officer of potential media issues, while promoting news and new initiatives for release through the communications team to the media.

## **iii) The Communications Officer**

The ultimate responsibility for handling pro-active and re-active media relations lies with the communications officer, assisted by the public relations coordinator. Any officer or staff member receiving a request for information from the media must, in the first instance, re-direct the request to this communications team. Only in this way can the council hope to provide a consistent corporate message to the media and, ultimately, our customers.

It will then be a matter for the communications team, in conjunction with the relevant officers, to devise a response.

Similarly, all pro-active communications to the media, such as a press release, must be sent to the communications team, who will then either develop or approve the press release. Only the communications team can send press releases to the media. In this way, the communications team will be able to ensure the council is presenting consistent, corporate messages to the media. It will be able to monitor media coverage and set performance targets. And the media will be receiving communications with the content and in a style they are most likely to use.

The communications team is responsible for:

- Providing guidance and advice to members, where appropriate or requested, on media relations.
- Corporate media relations.
- Providing guidelines and rules for staff to follow in media relations.
- Taking responsibility for the management in the media of all sensitive or seriously contentious issues.
- Contributing expertise to all major media campaigns.
- Issuing all media communications.
- Handling, in the first instance, all media inquiries.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the council's media relations.
- Maintaining effective relations with the local media and providing out-of-hours contact service for all press throughout the year.
- Providing or commissioning media training.

#### **iv) 'Expert' Officers and the Media**

Many media inquiries are about technical issues, such as planning, for example. In these instances, while it is right for the communications team to be informed in the first instance about the request, it is sensible for the officer with the relevant expertise to answer the query.

Everyone at the council should be aiming to promote the council and the work we do through the media. Although officers below deputy director level rarely speak directly to the media without arrangement with the communications officer, officers should be promoting the work they do to the communications team. The communications team will develop the press release and have ultimate responsibility for issuing it. However, the responsibility for making the media and our customers aware of the good work we do lies with us all. Don't be modest!

#### **v) Media Campaigns**

Occasionally it might be necessary to employ an outside PR agency for major campaigns. Whilst the ultimate decision to contract out these services will lay with the budget holder, the communications officer should be informed of the proposals at the earliest opportunity. Within the section there is currently more than 50 years of media experience at local and national level, including broadcasting and photography. It makes sense for departments to avail themselves of this free expertise before committing many thousands of pounds of taxpayers money to an external PR company.

The communication officer should also take part in the selection and evaluation process of any campaigns.

#### **vi) Out of Hours**

The communications officer will maintain an out-of-hours service for the media via mobile phone and the issue of home numbers. This means that one of the communications team will always be available to answer media calls. If a query cannot be answered directly by the communications officer, senior officers and/or members will be contacted at home until the query is satisfied.

### **4) GUIDELINES**

#### **(i) Keep the Communications Team Informed.**

When to involve the communications team will, to some extent, be a matter of judgement. The communications team should be informed whenever you are dealing with an issue to which any of the following questions is yes.

*Is it likely to attract a volume of media interest?*

*Is it sensitive or seriously contentious and thus likely to attract unfavourable publicity?  
Does it involve public consultation or publicity campaigns?  
Does it celebrate a notable success story?  
Are you unsure about how to handle the issue once it is in the public domain?*

**ii) Get the Timing Right**

Timing is critical. The communications team should be contacted as soon as possible when you have answered yes to any of the above questions. The team will then help to advise when to release the story to maximise publicity, or to help devise a response to mitigate a potentially negative impact.

By sending out all the council's media releases via one portal will also ensure we avoid good news stories clashing. For example, good news initiatives can be buried if they go out on the same day as the local media is full of news of a controversy surrounding the council.

**iii) A Spokesperson said 'no comment'**

This is never acceptable and it should never be used to respond to a question from the media. If contacted, simply state the communications team deals with all media inquiries and give them the team's numbers: 01343 563601/563045.

There may be occasions when it is not advisable or lawful from the council to comment. In that contingency we must nevertheless provide a short statement that explains why we cannot comment.

**iv) Tell the Public What We Do**

Many people have only a confused idea of what we do. One of the highest priorities of our media strategy should be to provide the public with a much clearer idea of what services the council provides and how we provide them.

Although the communications team will have corporate control for issuing and developing press releases, it is important services drafting press releases for the communications team take this important fact into consideration and incorporate it into the release.

**v) Build a Reputation**

It is relatively easy to place a release in the local media in Moray. No one release or interview, however, will make a fundamental difference to people's perceptions. Even on a single issue, our media management should aim to repeat the key message or messages as often as possible. The council cannot aim to build a reputation unless the publicity is properly badged. Again, the role of the communications team in co-ordinating all the council's media communications will facilitate this process.

In Moray, around 18,700 people buy copy of the Northern Scot every week, the P&J is bought by nearly 11,000 every morning, and other local papers such as the Forres Gazette and Banffshire papers have circulations relative to their areas. For every newspaper bought just over two people will read it.

#### **vi) Be Open**

Your department will sometimes be criticized, but this is not a reason to be overly defensive with the media. Inevitably there are many things that we do that some people will not like, often because they have not been fully informed. It is everyone's job to give the communications team all the relevant facts to minimize this risk.

Be robust in promoting a better understanding of Moray Council's services, plans and policies. More importantly, there are many things we do which have a very positive impact on our taxpayers. We should place a high priority on celebrating our achievements and sharing them with a wider audience.

Again don't be modest.

#### **vii) Take a Pro-Active Approach**

The best way of managing the media is to stay one step ahead. This is not always possible, but if you wait for the telephone to ring your media relations will always be reactive. Always ensure a draft press release is sent to the communications team about any good news items we should be promoting. This gives the team the opportunity to develop a finalised press release, organise pictures and co-ordinate the releases.

The same rules apply when preparing for potentially negative news items. At the very least holding statements should be ready to go in the event of any leak. When in doubt, inform the communications team.

#### **viii) Complaining to the Newspaper**

This can be a very effective way of managing the media, providing it is exercised selectively. If you complain every time there is a minor inaccuracy or someone expresses an opinion that does not coincide with yours, your stock will fall. You can rarely put the record straight once it's been reported. Even if the media publishes a correction, or your letter, the record has already been bent by the impression created in the original article.

The communications team can advise when to make complaints and make them on your behalf. To complain effectively, you must confine complaints to serious errors of fact or breaches of faith. And you must make sure the journalist or newspaper has no sensible defence. Nobody likes being the subject of a valid complaint.

This will not put the genie back in the bottle, but it will ensure that the next time a story about you or your department is carried, it may be more satisfactory.

#### **ix) Media Relations and the Law**

All staff should be aware of our legal obligations to openness and accountability. The press and the public enjoy rights of access to agendas and reports that do not disclose confidential business. We are required to admit the media to meetings and must specify exempt business to exclude them.

The council must also comply with the code of recommended practice on local authority publicity, issued under the Local Government Act 1986 (as amended). This code makes it clear that any publicity describing the council's policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both. Any comment should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. Publicity produced by the council should be free from any political bias.

The code of practice precludes the use of council resources to publicise individual Councillors. In the interests of public accountability, however, it may be appropriate to publicise the views of a member who is representing the council as a whole. For example, when the Convener speaks as the first citizen of the whole community or a committee chair on matters within his or her brief.

Staff and elected members should also be aware of the dangers of defamation in the context of media relations.

The reporting of council meetings, scrutiny panel meetings, committee meetings and properly constituted public meetings enjoy qualified privilege.

This means, providing they are fair and accurate and published without malice, the reports can freely report statements that might otherwise be regarded as defamatory. This does **not** apply to quotes from a member or officer **after** the meeting.

News releases issued on behalf of the council also enjoy a form of qualified privilege. In normal circumstances this applies to the publication of a fair and accurate summary of our releases.

Again, however, what you say in an interview as a follow-up to your release enjoys no such privilege.

Please also note that the media is sometimes loath to run corrections/apologies. This is not always because they are being difficult. It is often because an apology could be argued as confirmation they have previously published defamatory material and could land them in deeper legal trouble than not issuing an apology at all.

Specific guidance is issued by the Returning Officer to all elected members and staff, at election time, about the use of council resources in connection with publicity during an election period.

## **5) MEASURING OUR PERFORMANCE**

Performance indicators are being drawn up to enable the communications team to measure the council's media performance month on month, and year on year. The indicators will show the level of coverage achieved, the ratio of negative to positive reports, and the number of press releases and statements issued by the communications section.