

## **Hitting the Headlines – A Guide for Elected Members on Dealing with the Media**

A local authority should be as accountable as possible to its residents. It should also seek to inform its residents of its aims, works and successes on a regular basis.

Research by IpsosMORI has proved there is a direct link between the satisfaction levels of a public with its council and the amount of information that public receives.

The role of a Councillor has changed greatly over the last few years. There is now an even greater need to communicate regularly with the electorate – and a much brighter spotlight on your activities. You may work hard to raise your profile as a County Councillor in your local media or you may find yourself unintentionally the centre of attention.

This is where the Content and Communications Team can help. Press officers can advise on the best medium to use, the best timing for sending out information, the best way of presenting the message and how to handle questions from journalists. They will, though, be bound by the rules and regulations of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, detailed in Section Three of this Handbook.

Once you have secured your media slot, it is important to present the right image. Don't forget it is usually Council Taxpayers who may see you on television, hear you on the radio, or most likely read about you in newspapers.

There are a few golden rules you should observe to make sure people get the right idea about you.

- Appear lively, friendly, smile (if appropriate), interested, confident but firm – no matter how searching your interviewer's questions are. Avoid showing any hostility towards the interviewer and steer clear of confrontational language.
- Try to build bridges with individual journalists because they will respect your efforts and will be more likely to put over your point of view.
- Most importantly, always prepare thoroughly before being interviewed. Again, the Content and Communications Team can help here, so give the team a ring beforehand.

During an interview, these handy hints may help you present an even better image:

- Avoid saying “no comment” whenever possible because it looks as if you are hiding something. Instead, say something like, “I’m unable to comment fully at the moment, but of course I shall look into the matter.”
- Never just answer “yes” or “no” as it looks as if you have nothing to say. Give more detailed answers so the audience are confident you have knowledge of the subject being talked about.
- Never use local government jargon because residents do not understand and it could irritate them. For example – when speaking to the public we don’t say that the Council “has resolved to implement a strategy” we would rather say that the Council “will take action”. Equally, it is better to avoid “delivering integrated sustainable solutions”; instead, try “solving the problem”. On a more basic level, terms such as “operational”, “facilitate” and “procurement” can easily be swapped with “day-to-day”, “help” and “buying” respectively.
- Never guess or lie during an interview. If you do not know the answer to a question, just say so.
- During your preparation, limit your argument to three main points. Research has shown it is hard for an audience to absorb more than three main points at any one time.
- To make sure you are explaining yourself clearly, imagine you are talking to your own family. Ensure they could understand you, but don’t appear condescending.
- Do not panic if you make a mistake. Correct yourself – with an apology – either on air or before the item is carried on radio, television or in papers.
- Always ask how long the interview is likely to be and what the first question will be.
- Always dress appropriately for television interviews. As a rule of thumb if you wear the same kind of clothing that you will wear for a County Council meeting then you won’t go wrong.
- Be yourself and use personal anecdotes so your Council Taxpayers know you are someone they can trust.

An invitation to be interviewed by the media should be seen as a welcome opportunity, not a burden. With practice, you could become an expert.

## **Communicating with the Content and Communications Team**

If you have any media related queries you can contact the Press Office in the Content and Communications Team via email at [commsunit@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:commsunit@worcestershire.gov.uk) or call them on 01905 766646. Alternatively come and visit us in A1 in County Hall.

There are a number of ways the Content and Communications Team will communicate with you. These include:

- A weekly Members Catch-Up which is sent via email
- A daily Headline News including the top media stories is sent via email
- Copies of press releases will be shared with relevant members before they go to press, when the story is connected to their local divisions.

We are always looking at ways to improve our communications with members and your feedback is important to us. Please tell us:

- How would you like to receive information from us?
- How often would you like to receive it?
- What kind of information that they would be willing to share with Parish Council's in their divisions?

Send your feedback to [commsunit@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:commsunit@worcestershire.gov.uk)

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