

The Local Democracy Think Tank

LGiU
Scotland

Local Government Communications

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE

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Introduction

Effective media relations are important to all organisations, including local authorities.

Regardless of whether you are a councillor or an officer, it is important to not just understand how the media works but know the best ways to establish a good rapport with journalists.

Councils may not always like how their work is reported, but that does not take away the need to have a professional working relationship with local and national media, preferably built on mutual respect.

This means knowing how best to flag up activities for which the local authority is seeking publicity and being able to respond effectively when things go wrong, and the council finds itself in the spotlight for less positive reasons.

The media is changing, along with the way that council affairs are reported. Regional newspapers are in decline and the chances of finding local journalists with a thorough or even reasonable knowledge of local government are getting slimmer.

However councils are an important voice at both local and national in the press. To make reporting as balanced as possible, local authorities need to be media savvy and, in some cases, willing to take the rough with the smooth. Finally, they need to accept that not everything reported about them will always be exactly what they would wish.

Rather than fear the media, it is better to acknowledge it exists and, on occasions, presents local authorities with opportunities.

Though primarily aimed at council communications teams, this guide is designed to help anyone working in local government, including councillors, approach opportunities with greater confidence and thereby make the most of coverage. This guide brings together and adds new briefings we have published in England and Scotland on communications in local government. It looks at:

First, how to build good relations with the media: What is the best way of getting a message across so that it interests the media? How should councils ensure that journalists can get hold of its communications team? Who should speak on behalf of the council?

Second, how to handle bad news: Is it possible to prepare for a crisis? How should a council respond when things go wrong? What is the best way of explaining the council's position? What about press complaints?

Third, how to use social media effectively: Who are the different audiences and what type of social media are they likely to use? What the pros and cons of Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms? How can councils make the most of chatting with residents, without getting into unnecessary rows or arguments and making the situation worse?

There is also commentary on communications during pre election periods and handling sensitive information.

Building good communications with the media

Local authorities may not always appreciate how they are reported by the media. Yet if it wasn't for journalists, most people would know far less about what councils do and consequently, about the importance of local government.

Good relations with journalists are critical for local authorities, whether this means flagging up council activities in a way that is likely to interest the public or responding quickly and accurately to press enquiries.

How can councils work effectively with the media?

How to reach the media

Despite the growth of social media, the press release is still the most popular way of publicising local authority business and activities. Normally written by council press officers, they are mainly sent out by email as well as published on the council's website.

But how you can ensure that they are read by journalists in a busy newsroom? While email may be the most effective way of sending press releases to newspapers, broadcasters and other local media, it is better to email them to a named journalist than to the news desk. Do not, however, assume that is enough.

Follow up the press release with a tweet, or a post on the council's Facebook page, supported by any relevant photographs or film clips.



The Highland Council @HighlandCouncil · 4h

Thanks to the nursery & P1 children from Central Primary in #Inverness who sang Christmas songs & entertained cllrs before the @HighlandCouncil meeting this morning. Money was raised for the Cash for Kids appeal.



If you believe a story is especially newsworthy, it may be worth phoning a journalist, particularly if you know them quite well. But don't do this every time, and try to put yourself in the position of journalists and their editor and ask yourself how interesting or newsworthy the story really is.

Depending on the subject, decide whether a press release is also worth sending to national media, including specialist publications. Again, if you know journalists well, follow up the press release with a phone call or further email to a named reporter.

It may be worth investing in a database monitoring system that allows you to check who has opened and therefore probably read a press release that was distributed electronically. You can then target follow-up phone calls better.

Not all press releases will be taken up. Stories are more likely to get coverage if they are about something newsworthy or represent real tangible change: 'business as usual' isn't likely to get taken up. An announcement of a policy change or the launch of a plan is less compelling than seeing the results of that change or plan on the ground. Because an unusual story is more interesting, poor service or mistakes made by a local authority will often tick all the boxes to receive media coverage: they are local, hopefully uncommon (and therefore 'new'), and involve real people.

In addition, your local media will be looking for local stories: depending on the area in which they are distributed, this could be restricted to a single village. An engaging news story involves service users, rather than politicians or council officers. An original photo opportunity can make the difference between a story receiving good coverage or none at all: your communications team will be looking for more interesting alternatives to people simply standing in a row. For the online media – and most local press will also have an associated website – video is becoming more and more important as a way of capturing audience attention.

How should the press release be written?

When writing press releases, adopt a similar strategy to journalists and weigh up the value of the story. Start with an intro or opening paragraph that would not look out of place in print, or read by a TV or radio reporter.

[This story appeared on Brent Council's website](#), but could easily be taken from a north London newspaper:

Criminal landlords in Brent slapped with fines totalling half a million pounds

31 May 2017

Court fines paid by criminal landlords in Brent have crossed the half a million pound mark.

The £500,000 figure, which rogue landlords have been forced to fork out since January 2016, demonstrates the success of the council's 'zero-tolerance' approach.

Brent Council is leading the way in clamping down on dodgy landlords and ramped up its enforcement activity at the start of last year. An average of two to five prosecutions now take place in Brent every month. A total of 44 prosecutions in 2016/2017 led to 89 convictions related to landlord licencing and housing management charges.

If you start by stating that your local authority is committed to providing high quality services, or that your council is the best in the world, the press release is likely to be dismissed as council propaganda and most journalists will not bother to read any further. Instead, weave positive aspects of the council's work into the release while maintaining the relevance and focus of the story.

As will be discussed more later, local and regional media are desperately short of journalists. This means a well-written press release may appear in print, or online, in much the same form as it left the council press office.

Do not make the press release too technical or assume that the journalist reading it has much prior knowledge of, say, education policy or housing finance. The press release should be understandable to residents as well as to the media.

Remember to include a quote from a councillor or, depending on the story, a council officer. But do not make the quote too long. It is more likely that a journalist will need a short, punchy, quote for their story than exerts from a lengthy speech.

Should councils provide photographs and other images?

Yes, images are always welcome, particularly for cash-strapped local media. If the council is staging an event, take a photographer along at the same time as thinking whether a short film might be appropriate for social media.

Tell broadcast media in advance what is happening as TV companies may wish to film it for themselves. Display any photos proudly on the council's website and state on a press release if a range of photographs is available.

Finally, when putting press releases on the council's website, remember to include the date when it was first published. It is always possible that journalists will wish to look back and refer to older press release in the weeks and months to come.

How to ensure the media reaches you

Having set out to seek pro-active publicity for their activities, some councils make it as tricky as possible for journalists to contact them.

Look at your council's website. Does the word 'news' or 'media' appear on the home page? How easy is it for a journalist who may know next to nothing about the local authority to contact the press or media office?

Journalists are unlikely to take time to fill out an enquiry form. Instead, they will reluctantly call the main switchboard and take up valuable time of other staff while getting tired of listening to whatever background music is on offer.

A list of press officers, their direct phone numbers and, where relevant, a list of service areas they cover, will make it easier for journalists to not only get through to the press office but speak to the right person. See this [Kent County Council list](#).

A journalist who has been kept waiting on the phone is less likely to approach a story about the council in a favourable light. As one press officer says: "A journalist is a customer. You don't want to get off on the wrong foot."

Remember to include an out of hours press office number. Also, when staff are away, try to make sure that calls go through to another press officer rather than voicemails.

Ask journalists if they have a deadline, but don't use this as an excuse for delaying answering their query. Needless to say, you should always respond to a question or enquiry from a journalist within 24 hours, preferably sooner.

Do journalists always contact the press office?

No. It is very likely that journalists who report on local government regularly will have the phone numbers of the council leader and some cabinet members. The leader or the councillor with executive responsibilities would take the lead in some cases where there is media attention.

They have every right to report what councillors tell them (unless a conversation was 'off the record' and any quotes were meant to be non-attributable). They will also report what is said in council meetings.

It may be worth introducing a system where a councillor who speaks to a journalist and expects to be quoted informs the press office before any story is published. However, this can be difficult to enforce.

Most local authorities do not encourage, or even allow, council officers to talk to the media without the press office being informed and setting up the interview.

Getting your message across in the media

Once the media is interested in your authority, it is vital that you get your message across clearly and, in most cases, concisely. This means knowing who at the council is likely to speak to journalists most effectively about the topic in question.

Should it be a councillor or an officer? Generally, councillors are better at dealing with more controversial issues, especially when they are the result of political decisions. Do not put the chief executive forward to explain why large cuts are being made to services when the decision was made by the controlling group.

However, for some 'softer' stories that are not so politically sensitive, an official may be better-placed to publicise and explain a council project or scheme.

As one council press officer comments: "Journalists prefer speaking to officers as they're seen as the experts who know what they're talking about. But politicians should be the first port of call, particularly if it's a reactive story."

Remember, even if people have received media training, not every councillor or officer feels comfortable speaking to a journalist, let alone appearing on radio or TV. Be aware of who is happy to speak to the media, and make it clear to journalists as soon as possible whether an interview can be set up.

Communications teams will sometimes draft media quotes for the relevant spokesperson.

Do not attempt under any circumstances to turn the council press office into a set from *The Thick of It*, or try to control what councillors say using the methods of an Alistair Campbell-style spin doctor. This is likely to be resented by everyone and lead to some fractious relationships across the local authority.

What's the best way to approach an interview?

Prior to any interview, ask the journalist for a list of the topics he or she wishes to cover. That way, the interviewee can prepare the gist of the answers they wish to give in advance and have facts and figures to hand.

You could draw up a list of three or four key messages the council wishes to get across. But be careful about trying to twist the interview around so that the person being interviewed ends up appearing to read out a prepared statement, or avoids answering any questions in the style of some leading national politicians. Whatever happens, do not become angry or defensive, especially on camera.

Always bear in mind the audience. If a journalist is a political or local government specialist, they are likely to know more about the subject and require more in-depth information. An interview for regional TV, on the other hand, may be seen by people who know next to nothing about how local government works and require issues to be explained simply, without it sounding patronising.

A councillor, even a newly elected councillor, may answer the phone to a journalist unexpectedly or find themselves approached face to face. There are a few simple things to stay on track:

- Find out who you are speaking to and the media outlet they represent. This will help you to give a proportionate response
- Find out what they want to know – and why. What is the context for their enquiry? What angle might they be pursuing?
- If appropriate, ask what other people or organisations they have spoken to, and what they have been told so far
- Use key messages: if the topic is one you are aware of, your communications team may have already prepared some key messages which you can use
- Ask for some time to put together a comprehensive reply: you can also ask them to put a complex request in writing

- Check for accuracy: run your reply past your communications team and the service in question to make sure you have all the facts
- Reply promptly: if they have a deadline, find out when it is and make sure you get back to them in good time
- Use the three 'R's': 'regret, reason, rectify. If something has gone wrong, apologise, explain why or explain that the matter will be investigated, and explain what will be done to put it right

Councillors should remember that they represent the council. Opposition councillors in particular can be approached to give a contrary view to the approved local authority line – and that's fine. But bear in mind that council officers are carrying out the agreed policy of their local authority, as voted for by elected members.

And what not to do:

- Don't panic – you don't have to reply immediately
- Don't swear or use disparaging language. Even if meant as a joke, this won't come across well in print
- Don't hang up, unless the journalist is persistent to the point of becoming vexatious, in which case you can firmly but politely tell them you are ending the call
- Don't let them put words in your mouth. One journalistic tactic is to make a statement and ask if you agree, for example 'Would you say this is a disaster for the Council?' If you agree, then the statement could appear as a direct quote
- Don't say 'no comment': it immediately looks suspicious. If you genuinely can't comment, explain why. For example, say you don't have all the information but you will look into it, or say that you can't comment on planning applications before a committee decision, but refer the journalist to your communications team
- Don't brief 'off the record'. There is no legal definition of an 'off the record' remark, so everything so say to a journalist could appear in public. Even if you have a good relationship with an individual journalist, it is not unheard of for people to genuinely forget which parts of your conversation were on or off record. If you feel a journalist needs more context to a story than you can give, ask your communications team the best way to approach them

Should the council ask to see a report before it is published in print or online?

You can ask, but the answer is likely to be no. Better to invite a journalist to get back to you if there are any issues they wish to go over or need to check anything further. Once a

councillor or officer has spoken to a journalist, anything that they said is the property of the journalist (unless a conversation was 'off the record').

Respect the fact that the journalist has a job to do and, just because a story may be critical of the council, it does not mean the reporter or the organisation they work for is out to get the local authority. By providing as much information as possible, such as case studies that paint the council in a better light, the authority is more likely to receive a fair, if not always positive, hearing.

There may be times when it is not appropriate for any councillor or officer to speak to the media for legal reasons. In this case, a statement could be the only appropriate response, preferably issued in the name of a leading councillor or official.

Do not overuse official statements just because an issue is politically sensitive. As government press offices have discovered, a glib one or two sentence statement that is published or read out at the end of a largely critical report on struggling public services can make the department appear out of touch and even conceited.

Finally, remember that the media feeds on itself. A story about a school uniform row that starts out at a local newspaper can quickly reach the national media. "A small or mundane story can be in the nationals overnight because the parents have put it on Facebook," says one council press officer.

Important, therefore, to have a clear and consistent message, and possibly strategy, that is appropriate to not just local media but national newspapers and broadcasters.

Cultivating strong relations with the media

Local authorities should not just be open about what they do when they are asked to give comments. They need to be fully aware of how the media works, and the type of stories journalists are interested in.

Monitor the local and national media to find out what they are saying about your authority and local government in general. And do not limit yourself to newspapers, most of which are facing plummeting circulation, or regional TV and radio.

There may be bloggers who are interested in writing about the council, or already are, as well as 'hyperlocal' news outlets with websites that are read by surprisingly large numbers of residents.

Cuts in regional journalism mean that many newspapers no longer employ a local government specialist. Yes, it can be exasperating to be forced to explain relatively straight forward issues to a junior reporter who is writing about council affairs for the first time. But why not use that as a starting point and develop a relationship with the journalist by inviting them to meet some councillors, or visit a council facility?

To conclude – relationships matter

Good relations with journalists can make a world of difference during difficult times when the council is facing bad publicity. Instead of shying away and waiting for the media to do its worst, you could call up a journalist who is relatively sympathetic and offer to put the council's side of the story first.

One media officer explains: "Nine times out of ten, it's much better to be on the front foot and be part of the story so you can have your say. It may not avert reputational damage, but it's better to put your message across."

But this is only possible if the local authority has good contacts in the media and is not regarded as perpetually covering up things that it does wrong.

Whatever the circumstances, good media relations allow a local authority to operate in a more satisfying fashion and, if all goes well, receive at least some of the credit it deserves.

Journalists aren't perfect and, yes, they make mistakes. But a world in which the media could not report openly on local government and public affairs would be far worse than one in which councils are called upon to defend themselves and justify the decisions they take.

A pro-active media strategy that reflects the wide range of media operating locally and nationally in 2018 is not just preferable, but essential. That means everybody at a local authority gaining a fuller understanding of media values and mores, and how that affects the way people are likely to find out what the council is doing, for better and for worse.

Bad news and how to deal effectively with it

Bad news is sometimes unavoidable and, if a crisis arises, the response of the council can affect how residents view the local authority and in a few cases whether the council suffers reputational damage. The horrific fire at Grenfell Tower highlighted how hugely difficult it can be to manage media relations when something so terrible is happening.

We consider here how councils can work effectively with the media when faced with bad news or a crisis, including tips for elected members and officers on how to ensure the local authority remains in charge of the situation.

Preparing for a crisis

Is it possible to prepare for bad news or a crisis? Some public relations professionals say no and that how one responds to bad news is based as much upon instinct as anything planned in advance.

“You build up professional experience that means you know instinctively how to respond and what to say, or not say,” says one local authority PR officer.

However, that is not to suggest a local authority shouldn't be aware beforehand that it may be required to respond to bad news or to a major incident that could potentially paint it in a poor light.

Major incidents are any events that are unplanned, or only known about a short while in advance, and threaten the reputation of the local authority. A speedy and effective response is required, not only to reassure residents but to demonstrate to the watching media and wider world that the council is competent and has the situation under control.

Some organisations ‘test drive’ such scenarios, anticipating how they might respond in different situations, as well as assessing the potential risk to the organisation in each case. This may include drawing up draft statements that can be used in future, although the likelihood of any prepared statement being fully appropriate months or years in the future are probably slim.

A risk analysis of different scenarios has the advantage of showing how potentially serious any incident might be to residents as well as to the reputation of the council. This may lead to the council deciding which key people are earmarked to speak on behalf of the local authority.

This will probably be the council leader or chief executive, but it is possible other employees will need to be available for comment, or to co-ordinate the response.

It might be advisable to draw up a list, or grid, showing the different players or stakeholders in any situation – residents, employees, councillors, the media. What is each likely to wish to know and how will they be kept informed?

But the most important thing is to respond, and to respond quickly. Depending on the drama unfolding, the council may itself quickly become the focus of the story [see later – ‘Remembering you are the story’]. Consequently, silence or ‘no comment’ is almost certainly not an option.

Avoiding the blame game

When things go wrong, it is often tempting to blame someone else. Perhaps another tier of government or a sub-contractor. But it may well be that the council itself has taken its eye off the ball or made a serious mistake. This includes council employees or people and organisations working on behalf of the local authority.

Most incidents or crises are likely to come into one of three categories. The council should consider whether the situation is or was:

- within its control
- within its influence but not its control
- beyond its control.
-

Situations within a council’s control include fraud, a rent strike by tenants, or allegations made against teachers, social workers or other staff. Those within its influence might cover a gas leak, a cyber-attack, or an industrial accident.

Those beyond its control include extreme weather or acts of terrorism. Depending on the causes, a major fire can fall into either of the last two categories.

Even when incidents are beyond a council’s influence or control, the local authority must be able to demonstrate that it took steps to reduce the likelihood of such an event occurring, or the probability of such an incident causing death, injury or major damage.

In the case of fraud or embezzlement, journalists will want to know what controls, if any, the local authority had in place. Was the employee acting alone? Could the crime have been avoided?

Regardless of what an employee has done, or is accused of doing, they have a right to privacy and protection [see later – ‘Not forgetting the law’]. This must be borne in mind when making any statement to the media.

It is also inadvisable to put too much blame on a different local authority (unless the incident involves a service area that is clearly its responsibility, not that of your council). Similarly, statements pointing the finger at government departments (tempting though they may be) could have long term implications.

Finally, when it comes to members of the public, it is worth remembering they are probably council tax payers and, whatever they are accused of or are accusing the council of, they also have a right to privacy and possibly legal representation.

Residents are likely to use social media to flag up everything from potholes in roads to missed bin collections. What they say may not necessarily be accurate, but the council must react responsibly and avoid directing the glare of attention at a resident, a tenant or another member of the public solely because the local authority feels uncomfortable about being in the limelight.

Remembering you are the story

Depending on the scale and severity of the situation, a local authority may not have more than 10-15 minutes to issue its initial response. This should demonstrate that it is aware of what has happened and, if necessary, include a promise to come back with further information once the council has a fuller understanding of the situation.

Silence is not an option. If the media does not get part, or all, of the story from the local authority, it will use information it obtains somewhere else.

This could include comments by residents (either in person or via social media), who may have genuine concerns but who may also have their own reasons for ‘spinning’ the story in a certain way. Spokespeople for those affected and who are happy to speak to the media will often emerge, possibly with the support of those affected, but possibly not.

So-called ‘citizen journalists’ (members of the public who act in a similar way to journalists but may not have any training or much experience of journalism) are also often more than happy to provide the media with information.

If there is a fire or an incident caused by extreme weather, the story will be all over the news anyway, with moving images or still photographs leaving the public with a reasonably clear picture of what happened.

If the local authority does not respond rapidly, there may be claims (unfair or not) that is trying to cover things up. Telling the media that all the council's directors are in a meeting is therefore not advisable.

The local authority has a duty to ensure that residents, directly affected or not, are shown concern and given any reassurance required.

Following the fire in June at Grenfell Tower, local authorities such as Camden told tenants they needed to evacuate tower blocks with similar cladding so that fire safety work could be carried out. Camden kept residents on its Chalcots Estate, as well as the media, informed through its website and via social media:



If a journalist has an exclusive story concerning the council that puts the council in an unfavourable light, the local authority may have little more time to play with. The council knows that other journalists are unlikely to come to it with the same enquiry or allegation – at least not immediately.

But it is still advisable not to delay putting out a statement or making a response. The journalist will not wait forever for the council's reaction, especially if that risks others reporting the story so it is no longer exclusive.

In this and cases where a story is being reported on a wider basis, good relations with journalists built up over time are likely to work in the council's favour. At very least, the journalist is more likely to know how the council operates and its key responsibilities.

But regardless of who is reporting the story, accept that the journalist is doing his or her job and speak to them professionally.

Recognise that news is news and they have a right to ask the questions they are, even if the council does not like giving the answers. Ask what other angles reporters are interested in pursuing. Are they interested in the council talking more generally about how it tackles such problems or issues?

Even where an individual's privacy is involved and the council is restricted in what it can say, there is no harm in suggesting a general story looking at the challenges of providing a particular service and the type of problems encountered.

In the case of stories about the weather, or a major emergency, work closely with other agencies or service providers. But if the council has a direct interest in the situation, owing to the effect it has on residents, or council property, ensure the local authority's voice is heard. Both residents and journalists should be aware of the role the council is playing in response to the incident.

Sometimes, local authorities appear over-bureaucratic and, due to the time they take to respond, a potentially bad situation for the council becomes even worse.

It is up to the media or communications department to cut through such bureaucracy. It may need to persuade other departments, including senior executives, of the need to be more open and provide information to residents and the media. "You have to be a pain the arse and cut through hierarchies," says one PR officer.

But remember, the lack of response from parts of the local authority may be down to fear or inexperience, as well as the culture of the organisation. Other employees may be waiting for the media or communications team to take a lead or to offer advice, so make sure you are available to steer the local authority through what may well be a tricky few days, weeks, or even longer.

Press complaints and IPSO

Two recent IPSO adjudications show different outcomes for local government. Thurrock Council's complaint that a local newspaper had characterised the local authority inaccurately was not upheld, as the paper could provide evidence to support its factual reporting, and opinion in the article in question was clearly marked as 'comment'. IPSO adjudicated in favour of Tower Hamlets Borough Council when they complained that an article about a foster care placement was misleading, though other elements of the complaint were not upheld, or could not be examined.

What is IPSO?

[The Independent Press Standards Organisation](#) (IPSO) is an independent industry regulator. Newspapers and magazines in the UK can choose to become members of IPSO, and sign up to its Editors' Code of Practice. In addition to offering training and advice, IPSO can investigate complaints that one of its members may have breached the Code. If a complaint is upheld, IPSO can order sanctions, such as printing a correction or publishing the adjudication. It can also fine members for serious failings.

IPSO is funded by its members, but operates independently. It can only investigate complaints against its members, which must publish a printed newspaper or magazine in the UK. While it can investigate complaints about online content, this must be content on the website of a member publication.

What is the [Editors' Code of Practice](#)?

IPSO's Editors' Code is generally accepted to represent the industry benchmark for journalistic standards. It requires members to:

Ensure what they report is accurate

Respect individuals' privacy, with additional clauses relating to the privacy of children and, in particular, children involved in sex offences

Refrain from harassment or intruding into people's grief

Protect confidential sources

The Code allows for exceptions to some clauses, such as respecting privacy, payment to criminals and the use of 'clandestine devices and subterfuge', where there is a public interest.

Complaint not upheld: Thurrock Council v the Thurrock Independent

The Thurrock Independent was found not to have breached the code of practice when a complaint was made by Thurrock Council. The Council had complained that an article published in January 2018 contained inaccuracies: specifically, that the paper stated the Council was refusing to reply to media enquiries while the Council contended that enquiries had been responded to. The Council complained that it had not been formally made aware of the intention to run the article, so had not been given right to reply, and objected to the council being described as 'secretive' and treating the media with 'contempt'.

IPSO found that the Independent had presented questions to the Council about each of the issues raised in the article, giving the Council at least 24 hours before the print deadline to respond. The Council had either failed to address specific points of the questions or responded after the deadline. While some of the questions were open-ended, for example, asking for a comment or explanation rather than simply fact checking, the Council had not raised this as an issue with the newspaper. IPSO noted concerns with the way in which some questions lacked clarity or were hidden in lengthy emails, but concluded that, nevertheless, they were questions and the publication was entitled to state that the Council had 'refused' to answer them.

The Thurrock Independent had sent a copy of the proposed article to a press officer, and received no response. The article was duly labelled 'comment', leading IPSO to conclude:

'...the characterisation of the complainant as a "council of secrecy & contempt" and the claim that it "treats the media with contempt" were plainly the publication's own characterisations, presented within a comment piece, the basis for which was made clear. The publication was entitled to express its own editorial position, which was clearly flagged as such...'

[Thurrock Council has since announced that it will not respond to enquiries from the Thurrock Independent's editor for six months.](#) on the grounds of vexatious and unreasonable behaviour, including identifying individual members of staff and contacting junior officers directly rather than addressing enquiries to the press office. This decision by the Council has been criticized by the News Media Association.

Learning points for local authorities

- Have a clear system in place for keeping track of enquiries and when responses are due

- Acknowledge requests for comment and explanation as enquiries
- If the manner in which media enquiries are made renders them unclear, raise this with the media outlet
- If a response will not be made by the deadline, let the media outlet know and explain why, and whether a response may be available later
- If it is felt that a response is inappropriate because it is not for the council to answer, let the media outlet know and explain why no response will be forthcoming
- Repeat enquiries should be responded to, if only to repeat the answer already given
- Establish a procedure for answering media enquiries, including out of hours, and ensure all officers and members know where to direct media enquiries
- If considering making a complaint, take into account whether the media has publicly indicated content is comment, conjecture or fact

Complaint upheld: Tower Hamlets Borough Council v The Times

Tower Hamlets Borough Council was the subject of a series of articles in The Times in August 2017 which reported concerns over a fostering placement. Articles on 28 and 29 August stated that a child of Christian heritage had been inappropriately placed with a Muslim foster carer, that the care she was receiving was poor, and that the Council was stopping the child from being cared for by her grandmother. The local authority could not provide the newspaper with information to negate or contextualise these claims, due to legal restrictions protecting the privacy of individuals.

However, after the publication of a court order which put some key facts in the public domain, the Times ran another article on 30 August. The Council complained that this article gave the impression that the Council had not been the active party in ensuring the child was placed with her maternal grandmother. The headline 'Judge rules child must leave Muslim foster home'; reporting that the judge had 'removed' the child from her previous placement; and the implication in the article that the judge's comments about ensuing the cultural appropriateness of placements were intended as criticism of the Council were all inaccurate. On the contrary, the Council had applied to the court for the placement with the grandmother to be made.

The local authority contended that the newspaper failed to include relevant information which came to light at the court hearing and in the published court order: that the child's grandmother was a Muslim, and that the former foster placement had been independently found to be appropriate. Tower Hamlets Borough Council also complained that the article gave the impression that the Council had tried to block the reporter from attending the court

hearing, which was not the case, and that the Times had published a photograph of the child and her carer in which they could be identified.

The Times maintained that it had not published details of the grandmother's ethnic heritage and religion in order to avoid her being identified, and claimed that her religious heritage was disputed. The newspaper stated that the assessment of the placement which found it appropriate had not been included in the article because it failed to address specific concerns raised in previous articles, and that it had not specifically claimed in the article that the reporter being temporarily denied access to the court was because of any intervention by the Council.

IPSO concluded:

'Read as a whole, the article gave the impression that the judge had found that the placement was a "failure" by the council; and that this was why she was "removing" the child from her current foster carers, and placing the child with the grandmother. This was a distortion.'

The newspaper had therefore not taken sufficient care and allowed the publication of distorted information, and had not taken further steps to correct this impression, breaching two clauses of the code of conduct.

However, IPSO did not hold that omitting information about the religion of the grandmother and the assessment of the placement constituted 'inaccurate' reporting: it was true that concerns about cultural appropriateness of the foster care placement had been raised, and the positive earlier assessment did not necessarily refute these. IPSO also found that reporting suggesting that the Council had claimed publishing an article could be an offence directly before reporting that security staff tried to stop their journalist attending the hearing did not imply that it was the Council that had attempted to block access to the court.

The complaint about the photograph could not be considered by IPSO because, at the time of the panel ruling, the child was no longer in the care of the Council.

IPSO required their adjudication to be published by the Times. The article under dispute had appeared on page 1 and was continued on page 6. Because the article remained 'an accurate account of the outcome of the judge's decision', IPSO required the adjudication to be published on page 6, or further forward. The headline was to be agreed in advance and had to refer to the subject matter and state that a complaint had been upheld. The adjudication also had to appear on The Times website and the online version of the original

article had to be corrected, or have the adjudication clearly linked to it. The Times complied, and published the adjudication on page 1.

Learning points for local authorities

- If you are restricted from releasing information, clearly explain why
- If you can, give generic information that might add context
- Consider reminding journalists of their own requirements to protect the privacy of individuals, particularly children
- If considering making a complaint about accuracy, ensure you can evidence specific instances – contiguity of two factual reports in an article to imply a link is not enough: the link must be expressly stated
- Try to be as impartial as possible in judging whether a complaint is likely to be upheld: selective reporting and the use of emotive and subjective language can, on balance, give an inaccurate impression to the extent that it constitutes distortion
- Even if upheld, a complaint can be time-consuming and any reparation will come months after the original reporting

Concluding remarks

It is clear from these cases that taking a complaint to IPSO is not something to be taken lightly. Ensuring the issue is one which can be investigated, gathering the evidence, and awaiting the outcome will be time-consuming. It may also lead to a breakdown in the relationship between press and council. Authorities considering such action should consider carefully whether there are alternative ways to resolve disputes. They should, however difficult it may be, examine the issue objectively, based on the contested coverage only and setting to one side any longer-standing grievances.

While the readership of their printed editions is dwindling, newspapers retain a loyal, sometimes mature readership, and many outlets are reaching new audiences online. For many local newspapers, the relationship with their local councils is, if no longer symbiotic, still potentially mutually beneficial. The press allows authorities to reach a certain sector of their customers with information about services, while local newspapers find a rich seam of stories in council media releases.

When it comes to the national press, there is less likely to be an existing relationship to try and protect – or salvage. However, national media can be more challenging adversaries. In the case of The Times, many other media outlets objected to their reporting once the facts became public: long before the case came before the IPSO panel.

Is it, then, worth navigating an IPSO complaint, if the best possible outcome is a printed correction months after the event? The Tower Hamlets instance is unusual in that facts which supported the Council's case became public. Many other local authorities have found themselves in similar situations, albeit perhaps not quite so high-profile: acutely aware of the mitigating circumstances but legally prevented from sharing them with the media. The true worth of an upheld complaint, then, may be preventative; making sure other media outlets learn the lessons of their peers and take more care over future stories. Perhaps next time a journalist drafts a story in which a council has been unable to offer a response, they will remember the adjudication against the Times and revise their wording accordingly.

Making the most out of social media

Social media is everywhere. To some extent, it affects the lives of everyone, even those who profess not to use or understand it. It is therefore essential that local government public relations teams use social media alongside more traditional methods of communication.

Social media may also be used by local authorities at corporate level, with individual departments sometimes having their own Twitter or Facebook accounts as well. In addition, councillors and employees may use social media in a personal capacity in a way that informs people what is going on at the council, discusses events that affect it, and possibly generates controversy.

To get it right, the authority must be clear about what it wants to achieve from social media, and be aware of potential pitfalls. Those who use it on the council's behalf, whether staff or elected members, need to be confident and understand the possible repercussions.

Beyond the need to avoid obscenity and remain within the law, there are no set rules for social media. Guidelines, in as much as any exist, have developed haphazardly over a very short period and reflect what people in local government and elsewhere do every day – often without thinking about it.

So how do local authorities use social media? We look at this here mainly, but not exclusively, from a public relations perspective: pointing out opportunities and flagging up pitfalls in the hope that councils will see the benefits of using social media not just competently but also imaginatively and effectively.

Social media and communications

It is highly unlikely that anyone will get a job in public relations in 2018 unless they have at least a working knowledge of social media. Even in larger communications teams, most or all media or PR officers are expected to 'chip in' and use social media as appropriate.

Social media may be used to highlight an event, give the council's response to a news story, or to ask for comments, even complaints, from residents. But it is a two-way street, which means anybody with an opinion can have their say about the council is doing. It is worth also remembering that, depending on the platform, the audience is likely to be quite different.

Residents are probably best reached via Facebook. They want to hear about news that affects them and may welcome an opportunity to post comments, or make complaints.

Fewer residents are likely to follow the council on Twitter, unless they have an interest in politics, local government, or one element of the council's operations. YouTube may occasionally be of interest, and they may enjoy looking at photographs on Instagram. But unless they are keen photographers, they are more likely to observe than share or participate and will probably need to be signposted towards anything the council especially wants them to see.

Journalists may follow the council on Twitter, depending on whether they live and work locally. They are unlikely, however, to follow more than two or three Twitter accounts at the same local authority. It cannot be assumed they will see the council's Facebook posts, or subscribe to the council's YouTube channel. While they may sometimes tweet about the council (which means it is worth the council's PR team following them on Twitter), they are, at best, likely to dip in and out of the council's overall social media output.

Corporate clients and other stakeholders are quite likely to follow the council (or part of it) on Twitter. They may occasionally use Twitter or other social media to comment on what council activities or reaffirm a commercial relationship they have with the authority. Some will want to communicate with the council on a more professional basis via LinkedIn and may also check on the council's Facebook and Instagram pages, if only to see whether they are better than their own.

Using social media for communications

With so much on offer, what are the pros and cons of using different social media platforms and how is this likely to affect the wider local authority?

Twitter

Love it or loathe it, Twitter cannot really be ignored. Not only is it a preferred means of communication of politicians and opinion formers, but it is a way for a council to speak to the nation and even the world. Unless a crisis breaks out, however, and a council is thrust into the public glare, it can never be 100 per cent sure who is paying attention to its tweets and whether they have any impact.

Twitter is fast and often furious. Tweets are also short and to the point, which means people suffering from information overload are more likely to pick up on anything the council does, or says. That does not mean, of course, they will get the full story. By including its Twitter feed on its website home page, the council can show it is 'active' and up to speed with some, if not everything, that is going on.

The best tweets do not stop at 280 characters. By incorporating a photo or video, plus a link to a press release or other web-based materials, a council can capture the attention of more followers (and others). This should give people a fuller picture of whatever the council wishes to publicise.



This tweet about universal credit by Southwark Council’s press office includes an image and (shortened) weblink to direct readers to the report. It was retweeted by the press office itself 22 hours after the first tweet to increase the chances of it being seen by its Twitter followers and other users.

It is fair to assume that many journalists will discover council news via Twitter. If they follow you, follow them back. If the council has more than one Twitter account, take opportunities to retweet some (but not all) of things the wider authority is doing. But remember that Twitter and other social media accounts must be regularly monitored, with responses given to legitimate enquiries.

Residents may turn to Twitter when there is an emergency, such as bad weather. Also bear in mind that some residents will use it to post complaints and comments. These can either be acknowledged, or ignored [see later under Facebook]. Try at all costs to avoid a public spat or argument. “There is no dispute or argument that you can have on social media that is worth winning,” says one PR officer.

It is also worth remembering that humour, especially irony, does not always travel well in a tweet and can cause more problems rather than diffuse the situation.

Social media is meant to be informal, so try to avoid sounding too corporate. But remain professional. If you have time, have a look at who is following the council and, if they work in the media, gain an insight into the type of stories they report.

If councillors, or employees, are using personal accounts to tweet about the council, check if they require any training or guidance. It may be advisable to ensure their relationship to the authority is evident in their profile, or their Twitter handle/user name, to avoid embarrassment or confusion.

If you retweet from a council Twitter account, it will almost certainly be regarded as the council endorsing the original tweet – even if that was not the intention.

Twitter can be a window to the world (or at least part of it), but remember the world can also use it to observe your local authority. Ensure, therefore, that anything people read or see shows the council in as positive a light as possible.

Facebook

Facebook is somewhere to meet the people, where the council's messages or posts are more likely to be seen by residents. Journalists may show an interest from time to time, but are unlikely to be frequent visitors.

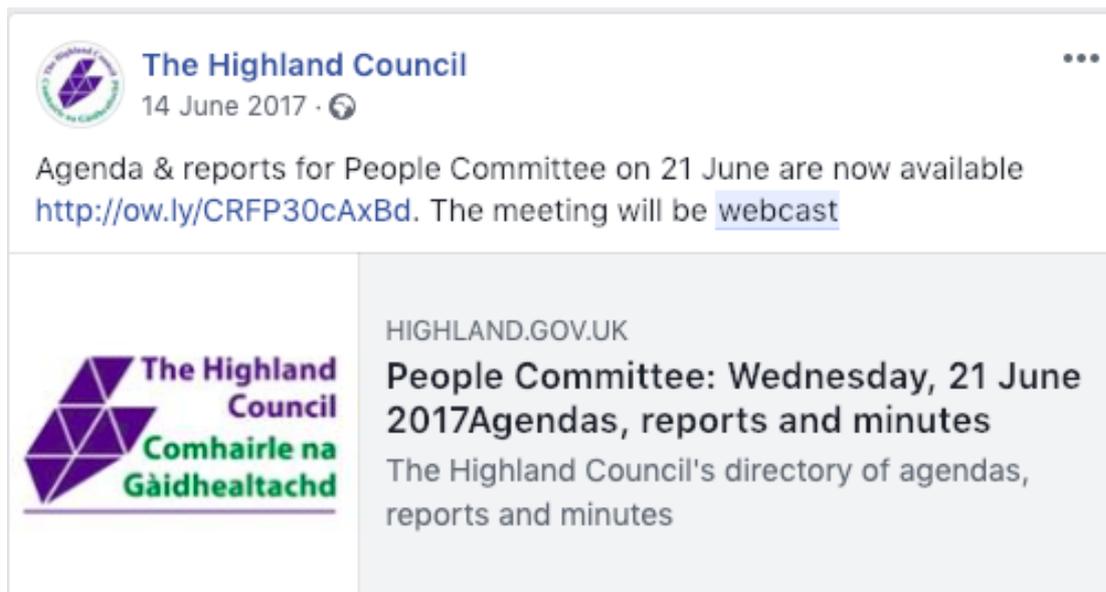
Many councils post the same messages on Facebook and Twitter. Images, or video, will help garner more attention, and residents who show most interest in the council via Facebook, including posting their own comments or questions, are most likely to receive council updates in their algorithm-inspired newsfeeds.

Some residents will be argumentative, asking, for example, why one area or estate is getting extra money and not others. Residents may end up arguing with each other, but the council itself should be braced for a fair amount of criticism, not all of which will be polite or constructive.

So how should an authority respond to negative remarks? The best advice is to acknowledge genuine complaints and concerns and inform the individual how to contact the relevant arm of the council. Do not get involved in any discussion that could lead to private information being divulged but, equally, making no response at all may give others the impression that the council is ignoring a complaint. "Only get involved in a discussion if you can add value," says one council's social media manager.

If someone makes an observation or political point, it is perfectly acceptable to say nothing on the grounds that everyone is entitled to their opinion. After all, this is not TripAdvisor. Equally, the council is bound to be aware of how it is seen by Facebook users, residents or otherwise. Comments that are racist, sexist or homophobic must be removed immediately.

Facebook is an ideal platform for question and answer sessions involving senior council figures, or for flagging up the live broadcast of a council meeting:

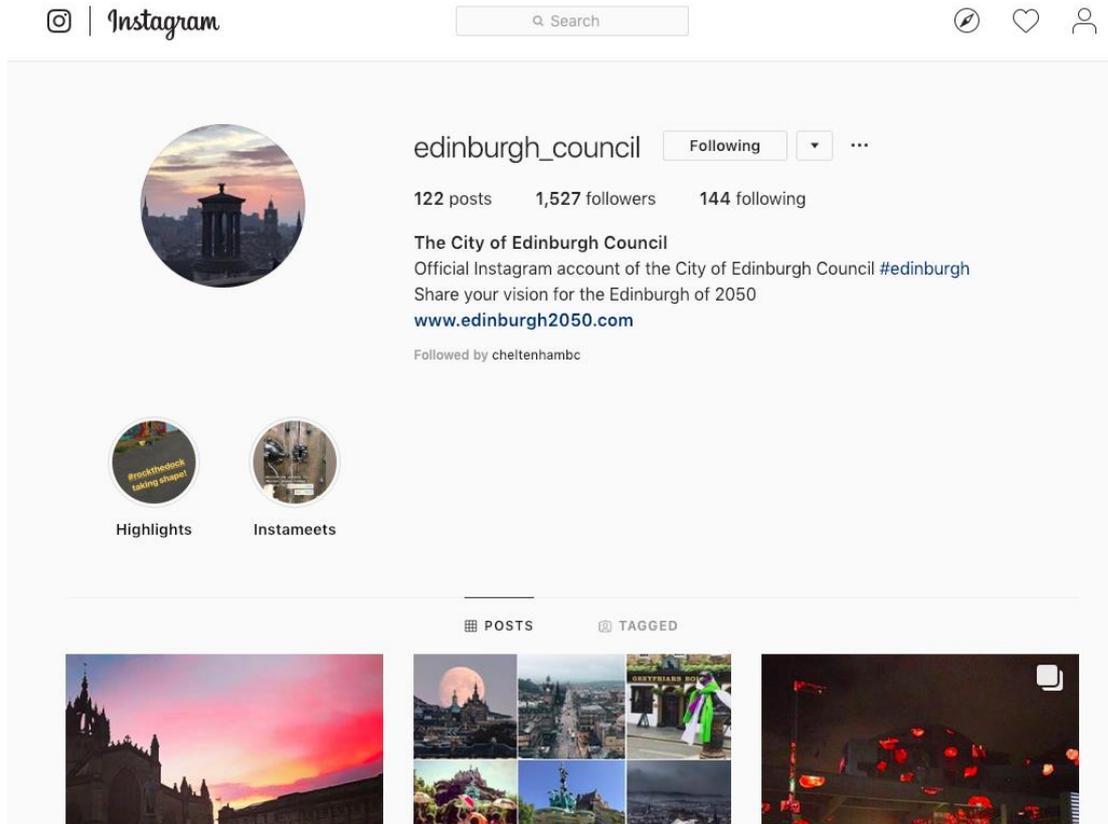


Job vacancies can also be advertised via Facebook. As with Twitter, do not be over surprised if the response to some posts is slightly underwhelming. Just ensure that the council drops its more serious face, adopts a friendly tone, and uses first names wherever possible.

Instagram

Instagram allows councils to get across their warm, more affectionate side. In effect, it is a 'shop window' to the community, an opportunity to show residents at play or at work, enjoying the fact that they live in cohesive local authority community.

Compared with Twitter or Facebook, most councils have quite small followings on Instagram. But Instagram can help to create a buzz around an event, with residents, if they wish, sharing their photos alongside photos or short videos posted by the local authority.



The City of Edinburgh Council invites residents to use its Instagram tag (#edinburgh), or address, to share photos or communicate with the council.

With some people using Instagram to tell their life stories, or to launch marketing careers, it seems logical for councils to get in on the act. Occasionally, an authority may use it to post more informative images, such as a weather warning, but bear in mind that an out-of-date, or rarely used, Instagram account can come over as worse than not having one at all.

Instagram stories, a relatively new feature, allows users to post words and images that are automatically deleted after 24 hours, though that may not necessarily be what the council wants.

YouTube

One of the first social media platforms, but another relatively new player in terms of its use by local authorities.

YouTube provides the opportunity for councils to post longer videos designed to inform, as well as entertain. As with Instagram, the number of followers may be relatively small, and councils are likely to have to point people towards films they have posted on YouTube via other social media, or a website.

However, as it is owned by Google, people are quite likely to stumble across videos posted on YouTube, so the potential audience is quite large. Consultations over budget cuts, campaigns about dementia or smoking, and appeals for foster carers can all feature effectively in YouTube videos:



LinkedIn

Mainly a platform to flag up a council's position as an employer and pillar of the community, LinkedIn is used to communicate with professionals in other organisations, including possibly contractors.

Journalists and residents are less likely to found on LinkedIn, unless they are self-employed. In which case they are most likely to be looking for work rather than general information about the authority.

The council's LinkedIn profile should mention key personnel, including the leader and chief executive, its main operations and vision for the area. Throw in some key statistics and shout about the council's successes or achievements.

Job vacancies can also be advertised here, but do not expect to receive numerous messages or get involved in many conversations, controversial or otherwise.

Social media and the wider authority

Depending on the size of the council, the media or communications team may not be the only department using social media.

As previously mentioned, many councillors (including the council leader/mayor) may be prominent Twitter users. Individual departments may operate Twitter accounts independently of the corporate account and that of the media team, geared to a specific target audience.

The potential of social media for customer service should not be underestimated. It will require investment, but in the long run it may turn out to be a cheaper way for an authority to communicate with residents.

All of this requires co-ordination, and possibly a social media manager. He or she must be aware of how social media is being used across the council, and ensure the messages put out are consistent.

One manager describes social media as 20 per cent speaking (mostly by media staff) and 80 per cent listening (usually by the rest of the authority). But social media is not an exact science, so how it is approached will vary from council to council.

Concluding remarks

While parts of social media have been around for more than a decade, it is, in some ways, still in its infancy. Some councils arrived on the scene rather late in the day, and even now may be reluctant users of some platforms.

This guide does not set out to answer every question. It focusses on the main social media platforms, and is designed to point out opportunities and highlight pitfalls.

Some councillors and officers may also have blogs that attract comments from residents and others. Whatever social media is used, bear in mind that most people are too busy most of the time to look at everything that is on offer, let alone to comment on posts, share photos or take part in debates.

Journalists may still need to be steered towards stories, and the traditional press release (albeit one that is also tweeted or placed on LinkedIn) has not gone totally out of fashion.

In the main, social media is for extra communication, for flagging up things that may be overlooked by local and national media and then waiting to see how the public responds. It

is also the place that a council can let its hair down from time to time, show its more human side and throw off the image it may occasionally have as a faceless bureaucracy.

Not forgetting the law - a note on handling sensitive information

Regardless of the incident, or the severity of the situation, local authorities must obey the law when it comes to publicity and media relations.

All information put out by councils is subject to Scottish Government's [code of practice on local authority publicity](#). The code covers areas such as:

- cost – all public relations activities should represent value for money;
- objectivity and even-handedness – council statements should focus on facts, and explanations of policies and actions taken;
- elections and referendums – councils should not issue publicity that seeks to influence voters;

Tower Hamlets, which was the subject of stories about a foster case in August 2017, has the following statement on its website:

Setting the record straight

The Tower Hamlets communications team works closely with newspapers and other media by issuing news releases, responding to media enquiries, arranging briefings and interviews and organising news conferences and other events. We also provide up-to-date information on this site, which we hope is useful for the public and the media.

In spite of our best efforts, media reports are not always completely accurate. People have a right to reliable information, just as we have a duty to provide it. That is why we introduced this section to the website.

The information we provide is subject to the [Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#). This means we are bound by the highest standards of propriety and accuracy in providing information.

As stated earlier, local authorities have had to ensure they did not infringe the 1998 Data Protection Act when discussing information concerning individuals. In addition to this, the new General Data Protection Regulation came into effect on 25 May 2018 (see our two briefings on the GDPR [here](#) and [here](#)). There is more detail on the Information Commissioner's [website](#).

As public authorities, local authorities must appoint a data protection officer with sufficient seniority and independence, and provide adequate resources to carry out the role. A single DPO can be appointed for a group of public authorities, taking into account their structure and size.

The DPO's minimum tasks are defined as being:

- To inform and advise the organisation and its employees about their obligations to comply with the GDPR and other data protection laws.
- To monitor compliance with the GDPR and other data protection laws, including managing internal data protection activities, advise on data protection impact assessments; train staff and conduct internal audits.
- To be the first point of contact for supervisory authorities and for individuals whose data is processed (employees, customers).
- Information concerning individuals might be residents (including tenants) or council employees.

Not only do employees and members of the public have a right to privacy, and possibly legal representation, but the council must be careful not to disclose personal information about individuals to the media or other residents [see earlier – 'Avoiding the blame game'].

But what type of information is confidential?

Sometimes it will be very clear when information is intended to be kept private, for example: committee papers intended to be taken in private session will often be printed on a different coloured paper. In other circumstances, you will need to exercise judgement.

You should treat as confidential all information which:

- Is supplied to you by council officers in confidence, in your capacity as an elected member
- Is personal, for example: individuals' employment details, names, addresses or dates of birth
- Is to do with commercial negotiations or contractual requirements
- Concerns legal actions or is protected by professional privilege, for example; information shared between a lawyer and their client
- Would, if made public, have a negative impact on the local authority or its customers

If in doubt, consider whether most people would regard the information as confidential, given what it is about and how you accessed it, and err on the side of caution. Just because a report is not labelled 'confidential' does not necessarily mean that it can be made public.

You should not store or use personal data for any purpose for which consent has not been granted. For example, to take the address details of constituents who have complained about a local issue and use it to send them a ward councillor newsletter would be unacceptable. An identifiable photograph of an individual is considered personal information

under the Data Protection Act and should not be used without their permission in publicity material.

Councillors (and officers) need to be aware of digital security, and familiarise themselves with their authority's protocol. For councillors, do not forward communications from your official council email account to a personal one, which may have lower security thresholds. If you must print out confidential information, keep it locked away when you are not using it, and ensure it is shredded when no longer needed. Similarly, if your council's protocol allows you to store sensitive information on a removable disc or memory stick, make sure this is password protected, stored safely and wiped clean when no longer required.

Constituents increasingly make use of social media to contact councils and councillors. If someone shares sensitive information with you in this way:

- If they have made it public, for example, by sharing it to your public Facebook page, you should remove it and reply to any concerns privately
- If they have shared it with you privately, for example in a private Facebook or Twitter message, keep it confidential and ensure you do not either deliberately or accidentally make the information public. Remember, people can view a Twitter conversation if they follow both participants, so it is always safer to use private messaging.

If you suspect a council officer or fellow councillor is mishandling sensitive information, you should in the first instance contact your Data Protection Officer or Monitoring Officer.

Sometimes, people contact the local media with complaints about the council. It may be that the council holds information which clearly refutes those complaints, or provides exonerating context. Council officers and councillors should be very careful about how this more sensitive information is used. Is it personal information? If so, has the individual consented to it being made public? Many councils adopt a policy of not commenting on individual circumstances, but providing information on policies and procedures, i.e., how the issue in hand would have been dealt with in principle. However, increasingly, local authorities are taking a more robust approach, assuming that if an individual has named themselves online or in local media they are implicitly granting consent for their case to be made public.

Handling sensitive and confidential information can seem like a negotiating a minefield, with numerous legislative and regulatory guidelines to adhere to. In practice, a common sense approach and the nous to ask for expert advice when necessary will serve elected members well, as will remembering never to put party political interests before those of a constituent.

It can be tempting, in a world of instant communication, to treat data casually, sending information out of a secure domain and potentially into the public sphere at the click of a mouse. Councillors who take a few seconds to consider the consequences of such actions may avoid causing themselves, their party and their local authority significant reputational damage.

Communications during a pre-election period

Local authority publicity rules

The rules on council publicity must be carefully observed during the pre-election period. On the individual elections, councils will be publishing factual information which identifies the names and parties of candidates in a way that promotes electoral registration and participation, but no more. While making some exceptions for the pre-election period, councils will be going about their normal business.

During this time, the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity makes it clear that councils must not report views or proposals in such a way that identifies them with any individual members or groups of members, or political party. The Code also acts as a prohibition on any use of council resources for campaign purposes.

Being alert to possible risks

Nothing in the Code prevents a council addressing issues of discrimination or harassment and tackling them publicly and head on during an election campaign, provided it acts objectively. And the Code does allow a local authority to 'correct erroneous material' which has been published by others, despite the fact that the material being corrected may have been published with the intention of influencing the public's opinions about the policies of the authority.

If it is felt that controversies may become inflamed during the election period, it would be wise to consider in advance what might be involved in monitoring local media and electoral materials, through partnerships with community groups and the police, and to have lines of contact in place.

The ward councillor

The role of the ward councillor continues throughout the pre-election period. At the same time, councillors will be playing a leading role in all these contests, and need to know how to balance campaigning with their council responsibilities. They must avoid any use of council resources in their campaign activities, and be prepared for some limitations on the coverage given to ward activities.

Publicity requirements during the pre-election period

Under the 1986 Local Government Act, nothing can be published at any time which 'in whole or in part appears designed to affect public support for a political party'.

A council's communications are governed by the government-issued publicity code, which covers 'any communication in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or a section of the public'. It applies to all decisions at all times by local authorities relating to paid advertising and leaflet campaigns, publication of free newspapers and news sheets and maintenance of websites – including the hosting of material which is created by third parties – and use of social media.

Under the [publicity code](#), councils are required to pay particular attention to their publicity during periods of heightened sensitivity, such as before elections. It may also be necessary to suspend the hosting of material produced by third parties, or to close public forums during the election period to avoid breaching the restrictions.

The publicity code makes it clear that councils cannot publish any publicity on controversial issues between the notice of the election and the election itself, and must not report views or proposals in such a way that identifies them with any individual members or groups of members.

The principles that underpin the Code require that publicity by local authorities should be lawful, cost effective, objective, even-handed, and appropriate, have regard to equality and diversity, and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

Community relations and the publicity code

In addition, councils are able to correct or rebut misinformation published by third parties during the pre-election period, in relation to matters that include equality, diversity and community issues.

Councils are also able to correct or rebut misinformation published by third parties during the pre-election period where equality, diversity and community issues are involved. Any intervention of this kind would always be made by a leading member or chief officer.

The code provides that:

Publicity by local authorities may seek to influence (in accordance with the relevant law and in a way which they consider positive) the attitudes of local people or public behaviour in relation to matters of health, crime prevention, race relations, equality, diversity, and community issues.

Local authorities should consider how any publicity they issue can contribute to the promotion of any duties applicable to them in relation to the elimination of discrimination, the advancement of equality and the fostering of good relations.

Indeed, should there be harassing disinformation in circulation during an election campaign, the council would be obliged to consider making a factual statement.

Should there be any anxiety about this, the scope for councils to issue rebuttal information was clarified in a [ministerial statement](#). Baroness Hanham made clear the government's view that councils do have the capacity to publish corrections to false information circulated by candidates and non-party campaigners during an election period.

Role of councillors during pre-election period

The role of the ward councillor continues throughout the pre-election period and they need to balance these responsibilities with their campaigning activities.

This means:

Councillors must avoid any use of council resources in their campaign activities: this means council email, phone, laptop and pager, as well as the members' room photocopier and other facilities.

And while for councillors and candidates, elections are all about publicity – the local news, leaflets, speaking at meetings, and increasingly, councillors' blogs and Twitter accounts – it is essential to be aware of the publicity rules.

In practice:

The Council's press office won't cover your ward activities! Normally, publicity about council policies and the work done by individual members of the authority and their views on local issues is allowed. A councillor can be the 'face' of a local campaign at other times, but not during an election period.

The definition of 'communications' used in the publicity code is comprehensive. The council will not publish photographs, articles or quotes connected with any individual councillor or group during the election period. Note too, that it will not be possible to use photographs or other materials from previous council publicity in campaign newsletters and leaflets.

You are free to speak to the media on your own behalf provided you do not appear to be speaking on behalf of the council. Elected members blogs and public discussion forums hosted by the council will have been suspended. If there is no specific guidance from your council, err on the side of caution in the use of your councillor Twitter account and avoid

using it to comment on council decisions and policy or to give information about your campaign. One council sensibly advises members not to post or share updates or images from political parties, politicians or political opinion or to tweet or post on subjects which are politically controversial.

Be alert to any risks that may arise in your ward, and report to the council any instances of false or misleading information circulating in the area which could be harmful to good race relations. Nothing in the Code prevents local authorities addressing issues of discrimination or harassment and tackling them head on during an election campaign, provided they act objectively.

Equality & Human Rights Commission

The Commission has issued [guidance](#) for local authority senior managers and returning officers, that is also for political parties, including candidates and regional and constituency staff, and should be of interest to police and crime commissioners, the police and the general public, that covers:

- Freedom of expression and free and fair elections
- Guidance for political parties and candidates
- Guidance for local authorities
- Restrictions on freedom of expression prescribed by law
- How to complain and the role of regulators

The guidance recognises that political campaigns are open and vigorous, and that candidates may speak and write freely on any subject: campaign material may be offensive, shocking or disturbing. It helpfully includes a chapter on how the law may intervene when a person reaches the limits of their right to freedom of expression, including a section on Incitement to Racial Hatred.

Conclusions

Having a positive relationship with your local media will always be the best solution. Nobody likes to read or hear things about them that are uncomplimentary or untrue. Yes, local authorities have every right to give their side of the story when something goes awry, or they are accused of doing something wrong. But councils should not be over-sensitive and retreat into themselves when it comes to bad news, or they are faced with a crisis.

A positive relationship with the media that is based on mutual respect (rather than loathing and suspicion) is more likely to deliver results for both parties – regardless of how bad a situation might on the face of it appear. Rather than being over-defensive, councils can take a more proactive approach to media relations so that, when they become the main player in a story, they do so at least partly under their own terms.

As public organisations that are funded by, and represent, residents, they should try to put the record straight. More importantly, they should ensure that the public, possibly via the media, is fully aware of what is going on.

A shift in communications channels away from traditional media is well underway. People are more likely to find information and news online, and to share content from friends and digital networks. While in some ways it has never been easier to communicate, it is also increasingly difficult to compete for people's attention. Councillors will find it pays to learn how to communicate compellingly and clearly in the new world of digital media.

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LGiU Scotland

LGiU Scotland is a local authority membership organisation. Our mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with local councils and other public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and third sector organisations.

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