

# Runnymede Borough Council

## Publicity, Media and Social Media Handling Protocol - DRAFT

March 2024

# Introduction

This protocol is intended to set out the legal framework in which media and social media relations takes place at the Council, explain how Council spokespersons are selected, how external individuals or organisations may be involved in the Council's communications, and how the Council's Communications Team manages media requests, news stories press releases. It also sets out restrictions on staff engaging with the media and explains options open to Members in any engagements with reporters.

This protocol is to assist Members and senior Officers to follow proper procedure in publicity and the handling of communications with the news media and on social media.

It operates in addition to any guidelines which exist and is to clarify and effectiveness of communication, management matters, etc., which may be circulated amongst staff, councillors, or informally within political groups. The Council also has a Social Media Policy which sets out in more detail how the Council operates its social channels.

## Legal framework

### Local Government Act 1972

A local authority has power to publish material relating to its services and functions under section 142 of the Local Government Act 1972.

There are also some service-specific powers.

An authority also has the incidental power of responding to enquiries from the press and public about its actions.

### Local Government Act 1986

All authorities are subject to the constraints on publicity imposed by the Local Government Act 1986. This prohibits political publicity and many sorts of campaigning, and requires authorities to have regard to the Code of Practice issued by the Secretary of State in making decisions about publicity. It also requires a separate account to be kept of expenditure on publicity.

### Local Government Act 2000

Under section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000, authorities may do anything which they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social, or environmental wellbeing of their area. They must have regard to their Community Strategy in exercising this power. This power may give broader scope for publishing material than section 142 of the 1972 Act, but, like it, will be subject to the matters mentioned below.

### The Local Authority Recommended Code of Practice on Publicity

This is contained in Communities and Local Government Circular 01/2011.

Publicity by local authorities should:

- be lawful
- be cost effective

- be objective
- be even-handed
- be appropriate
- have regard to equality and diversity
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity (before elections/referendum).

The document also sets out expectations on a number of other topics including how the Council should act during the Pre-Election Period.

## Politically restricted posts

Members of the Council's Communications Team, and most senior officers, are covered by political restriction. The legal basis for this can be found in [Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and The Local Government Officers \(Political Restrictions\) Regulations 1990](#)

# Runnymede principles

Runnymede will have regard to the law and Code of Practice whenever relevant.

It will not publish party political material or press releases on behalf of individual Members as this is prohibited within the legal framework.

However, Members in positions listed below as spokespersons will usually be quoted in press releases reporting on Council business, as the spokesperson represents the Council's decision making body or the authority corporately in such cases.

The role of quote in a press release is usually to:

- Personalise the information.
- Demonstrate who is responsible for the decision or activity which is being publicised.
- To 'sell' the topic to the reader or give an opinion or advice in a way which narrative text cannot do.

## Distinction between press releases and news stories

There is a distinction between press releases – which are sent to the media as the Communications Team judge they are likely to receive coverage, and news stories, which are published on the Council's website.

News stories cover a wider range of information than press releases and may also be seen as an announcement or be used to present more day to day or service level information.

Press releases will always contain a quote from a named councillor, but news stories will not need to carry a quote.

## Scope of Council communications

Generally speaking it will be appropriate for the Council to communicate on all areas of its business as usual activity and in regard to partnerships it is a member of, unless there are reasons in individual cases not to comment.

In most (though not all) cases, the topics on which publicity is issued will emanate from committee decisions, even when those decisions may have been taken months or years earlier, if they secured approval for long-term programmes.

Some examples of the type of publicity which the Council may issue, and which spokespersons may be quoted on include:

- corporate messages
- policy-based decisions
- a specific decision taken at committee,
- actions taken by the Council,
- specific workstreams delivered,
- new areas of business,
- milestones in existing programmes,
- support given to the Community.
- business as usual areas of the Council which require promotion,
- initiatives which the Council is a partner within,
- activities which the Council may have a vested interest in promoting,
- items deemed to be 'newsworthy', or
- items which present the Council as a leader in its field within a particular sector.
- Content supplied by public sector bodies, for example the police, county council, Met Office.
- Content which uses the Council's local high profile status to bring attention to an issue of public importance.

In addition, the Council may sometimes be expected to comment on issues which affect it as an organisation, or which affect the borough, county or local government sector as a whole.

In rare cases, the Council may be asked to comment on an issue and decide it is more appropriate not to do so.

## Recognised spokespersons

The Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council, Chairs and Vice Chairs of committees, and for certain civic purposes the Mayor, will normally be looked to as the official spokespersons for the purposes of press releases or media interviews or comments published on social media

These positions are selected because they represent the Council in a particular capacity, normally as the chair of a committee which has made a decision on a specific topic, or because their committee has oversight of the particular area which is being promoted or explained. As such they are speaking on behalf of the Council.

Other Members do not represent the Council in the same way and therefore cannot be expected to speak on behalf of the organisation, only of themselves as individual Members.

Any words offered by such Members, whilst representing, arguing for, and explaining the Council's position or giving a level of opinion whenever necessary, will respect the need for objectivity and the avoidance of party propaganda and the understanding they are speaking on behalf of the authority.

In some circumstances, individual Members may be 'namechecked' in press releases or statements. This does not equate to 'promoting' a Member but would happen where, for instance, a Member had instigated a course of action which later became Council policy.

## Role of the Leader in giving wider comment

In some cases the Leader of the Council, as the authority's most senior elected Member (by virtue of being appointed to the position of leader at Full Council), may give a statement on an issue, even when the topic has not been debated by a committee.

This situation may arise when:

- there is an emergency,
- 'breaking news' occurs and journalists or the public require a comment post haste,
- the issue is of an urgent nature,

- where community leadership is required, or
- a national situation impacts the Runnymede area.

In these circumstances there is not time to convene a committee meeting or there is no decision of any committee which could be reflected in the comments.

Should this be the case, Council staff would advise the Leader to comment in a way that is as neutral as possible, so it is not perceived as predetermining any future decision at a committee. Advice would further include that the Leader should comment in a non-political way.

## **Members of staff acting as a named spokesperson**

Occasionally a specific named senior officer at Corporate Head of Service level or above may also be a spokesperson. This will be the case when the topic is:

- on a particular point of process,
- highly detailed or technical,
- not appropriate for any Member to comment, such as about the disputed outcome of an election, or
- during the pre-election period when the selection of spokespersons must be decided with an extra level of sensitivity and in accordance with the Publicity Code.
- where senior Members are unavailable and the situation is similar to those set out under the above section about wider comment.

## **Corporate comments**

Where the phrase 'A Council spokesperson said:' appears in a press release or statement this will be a comment issued on behalf of the authority corporately.

If this term is used, the message provided will be confined to a factual or explanatory comment.

In such cases a member of the Senior Leadership Team would be expected to approve the wording, which may also be reviewed by a member of the Corporate Leadership Team.

## **Party political comments**

Material which is party political, or which is intended to publicise the views or activities of a particular Member outside of their role as a committee chair or vice chair on behalf of the Council, will not be published by the Council's staff or on its channels of communication.

Local party or campaigning organisations, or Members themselves, should publish such material directly and they should take care that it is not mistaken for an official Council publication.

## **Direct engagement between Members and journalists**

Reporters may contact a Member directly for comment on a story or issue. As elected representatives, Members may choose to contact a reporter directly as well.

When doing so, Members are only representing themselves (or in some cases their party), and they should make this clear.

If Members are approached by the press, and do not wish to speak to a reporter, there is no requirement to do so. Members may simply direct the journalist to the Council's Communications Team.

It is not the role of this protocol to regulate or advise on members' engagement with the media

## Staff engagement with journalists

Members of staff must not engage with or make commitments to journalists, including editors of local publications, unless they have the permission of the Communications Team.

Staff who are contacted by a journalist should redirect the journalist to the Communications Team without commenting on the topic they are asked about. This is to protect staff from being drawn into commenting on issues which they may not be fully conversant with, or giving opinions which may not be appropriate to do and to avoid longer term or difficult negotiations with the media being affected by one-off engagements by colleagues who may not appreciate the wider nature of a relationship with an individual outlet.

Staff who hold a trade union position may choose to speak to the press on behalf of the union.

Staff found to be passing information to journalists or posting on social media in such a way which breaches data protection rules or could bring the Council into disrepute are likely to face disciplinary proceedings under existing employment policies.

Staff members may attempt to draft a document which becomes a press release, in order to assist the Communications Team, but must not send it to Members for comment, or to the media. Engagement with Members and the media on press releases or other corporate communication activity will only be carried out by the Communications Team to ensure consistency of message and that stories are issued in accordance with the legal framework set out above and to avoid any clashes with other activity.

## Comments in Council communications by people who are not staff or elected Members

Occasionally the Council may include a comment in a press release from an external individual. These may include:

- Elected representatives (Borough MPs, county councillors or the Police and Crime Commissioner.)
- Senior officers from other organisations such as the police, fire service, education, health leaders, senior public sector staff or officials.
- Members of civic society (such as the Lord Lieutenant or High Sheriff)
- Representatives of the private sector.
- Corporate comments from the above bodies or similar.

In all of the above cases, these individuals would only be quoted *where doing so assists Runnymede to communicate its message or to demonstrate partnership working.*

## Recording and handling of press enquiries and engaging inaccurate information

Officers will maintain records to ensure that media enquiries and social media content is properly logged, dealt with and answered appropriately and in a timely fashion and that it is factually accurate.

Officers will also engage with the media or on social media to rebut and correct inaccurate information which affects the reputation of the Council. In such cases, the accurate situation will be ascertained and presented to the publisher in an appropriate manner.

Officers may also provide informal briefings or background information to journalists to assist them in reporting Council business accurately.

Officers will also maintain oversight to ensure that information disseminated directly by the Council is lawful and achieves good value for money.

## Approval process

In most cases, publicity will originate within the Communications Team. The following steps of approval would generally be followed to ensure a press release, statement or other significant content (eg a video) is factually accurate.

1. The Head of Service will review any press release or media comment to check language and messaging.
2. A manager or head of service in the relevant Council service area will then check the text to ensure the facts are correct.
3. The Corporate Head of Service and Assistant Chief Executive would then check the text for further reassurance and to ensure the wording does not come into conflict with any other Council business or position taken.
4. In some cases the Corporate Head of Law and Governance would also comment on the text to ensure it does not expose the Council to potential legal issues or conflicts. During the pre-election period, the Corporate Head of Law and Governance will be asked to approve or amend all releases.
5. If the press release or statement is being issued with quotes from a Member, that Councillor would then be asked to approve or re-write the text, once all officers had agreed the wording.
6. Should the Member make significant changes, the officer review process would be repeated until agreement is reached.

In most cases a written press release or comment / statement would then be supplied the journalist by email to secure a paper trail.

## Advance notice of significant communications activity

As the elected representatives of the Council, Members may be asked by residents or others for opinions on the topic of the Council's communications. The following will therefore apply:

1. To provide a physical presence and location, approved press releases and news stories will be published on the Council's website. Videos will be published on Youtube. (The Council's Youtube channel has a very small follower audience and is not currently used as an active channel of communication, but only as a place to host video.)
2. Press releases and news stories will be sent immediately to all Members and managers across the Council to alert them to the story.
3. Half a day will pass before the press release is circulated to the media.
4. A 24 hour period will pass before the press release or sections of it are published on social media or in newsletters.

Most social media content emanates from an approved press release. Where a press release or news story are not published, but a significant announcement is made on other platforms eg social media, this original content will be sent to Members and managers a day before it is published.

Due to the volume of social media content posted by the Council, this will only apply where a press release has not previously been circulated as the intention is to make members aware of a topic.

In all cases, the press release, news story or original social media will be sent for information, as it will have passed through a detailed approval process. It will not be sent for comment.

Newsletters will be sent to all Members and Managers at the same time they are sent to their public mailing lists.

## Communications during the Pre-Election Period

The Pre-Election Period begins when a Notice of Election is published and covers the period in the six weeks immediately before polling day.

When the Council is in a Pre-Election Period due to its elections, extra sensitivity will be applied to the Council's communications content and the rules stipulated in The Local Authority Recommended Code of Practice on Publicity.

**For all information contained within this document contact:**

Runnymede Borough Council  
The Civic Centre  
Station Road  
Addlestone  
Surrey KT15 2AH

Tel 01932 838383

email: [communications@runnymede.gov.uk](mailto:communications@runnymede.gov.uk)

[www.runnymede.gov.uk](http://www.runnymede.gov.uk)

Further copies of this publication,  
or copies in large print other  
formats or languages  
can be obtained via the  
above contact details.



Search: Runnymede Borough Council