

1.7

Dealing with the Press

As a Community Council Member, someone may approach you at some time from the press who is looking for a story. Alternatively there may come a time when, for whatever reason, you decide that you want to take information to the press. In either case it is important that you recognise how the press operates so that you can gain maximum benefit and avoid some of the common pitfalls.

Good relations should be established with the local press and, if its reporters do not attend AGMs or regular meetings, a suitable press release should be issued highlighting important matters discussed and conclusions reached where appropriate it is good practice to establish good relationships between the local media and the Community Council.

Generally speaking the press has two major priorities:

- To get "copy", that is to say, material to fill up newspaper columns;
- To get good "stories", that is to say, articles that have a human-interest value and which have the effect of lightening up the contents of the newspaper.

When you are dealing with someone from the press it is likely that they will make a quick assessment as to which category your information falls into, and this assessment is likely to be important in determining what actually happens to the information that you pass over. By giving your information a "human interest" dimension it may be possible to get much fuller coverage than would be possible otherwise.

For example, if you wanted to publicise an event in your community you might simply pass details of the event over to a local paper. Alternatively, you might write a short article on the person who is organising the event and the particular problems that have been encountered on the way. If you choose the first option it is likely that the information will be tucked away in a corner of the paper where not many people will notice it, whereas if you choose the second option you may find that a fairly lengthy article appears with a photograph alongside.

The primary concern of the press is to sell newspapers and that means providing news and information that people will want to read. So try to make sure that you are providing material that will interest people as well as simply inform them.

Perhaps the best way to interest the press is to issue a formal "Press Release", which at its most effective is probably a half to three-quarters page of A4. It can be issued to both local and regional newspapers and on occasion may interest national papers. Don't forget local radio and television stations.

You should also keep in mind that journalists have the power to edit news items. In practice this means they can put an emphasis on particular words or events that you may not have intended and in this way the message that you were trying to convey may end up getting distorted. The solution is to try to ensure that you choose your words carefully; knowing

that anything you say could end up as a headline. It is not difficult to make the headlines in a local paper, but it is sometimes difficult to live with the headlines that you make.

Try to remember also the constraints that local newspapers work under. They have tight deadlines to meet so make sure that you submit your copy in plenty of time. They also appreciate information and articles that can be printed without a lot of cutting and reorganising so try to make sure that the information you provide is to the point.

Handling press interviews

When a journalist is actually interviewing you it is necessary to be particularly careful about what you say. It is easy to be caught off guard and to say something that you didn't really mean. Be very wary about *off the record* comments because these may end up being attributed to you.

The best approach is to think out what you want to say before the interview starts. If that means taking a few minutes to prepare your thoughts, do so. Try to be clear about what sort of message you want to convey, and make sure that it doesn't get lost during the interview. If you are unclear, ask them to call back later, and do your research for example by checking with the Chairperson or Secretary before you commit yourself to comment.

Beware too that spreading erroneous or inaccurate information or indulging in abusive criticism of other parties, can not only devalue what may have been a reasonable case, but could also invoke legal action for defamation.

Quick Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy time – don't respond off the cuff. A casual comment can be taken out of context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't use an item of information as fact unless you're certain of it.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare what you want to say – write it down and then ring back. You may be asked for an immediate response due to deadlines but be firm, take a few moments to consider a response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't speculate. Your conjecture will end up as somebody else's hard fact.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do explain where the media's questions can be answered, if you yourself cannot help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't hinder or obstruct. The media have a job to do and it is better to form a good relationship and give them the information you feel you can give. In emergency situations the media can be very useful in informing the public quickly of developing situations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do remember that your attitude to the media and what you say reflects on everyone else involved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't say "No Comment". No comment is a negative remark, and is seen as confirmation that you have something to hide.

Keeping fellow Community Councillors informed

Community Councils should agree a protocol to ensure all Members of the Community Council are aware and informed of press dealings. This ensures that relationships are maintained and developed within the Community Council.

Keeping people informed

It is worth remembering that, for most people in your community, the only regular information about the work of their local Community Council that they may have access to is what they read in the press. For this reason, it is a good idea that Community Councils make every effort to pass good quality information to the local press on a regular basis.

The more informed members of the community are about local issues the greater the likelihood that they will want to get involved in what's going on. This may require providing information in other formats, such as a different language or considering the age group of the audience that you are trying to communicate with.

If a member of the press is unable to attend your meeting it would be good practice to provide a summary of the meeting (see suggested Meeting Summary template in Section 3) to your local press.

As part of your Community Councils ongoing promotion and commitment to engage with your local community, **provide regular updates through the press** to highlight the work you are undertaking **and success stories**.

Writing a press release

From time to time it may be advisable to issue a formal press release stating the Community Council's views or clarifying facts. This is particularly important when a controversial issue divides the community or when, in the opinion of the Community Council, their discussions have been either incompletely reported or misrepresented in the media.

See the section 3 on forms and templates for a suggested press release template.