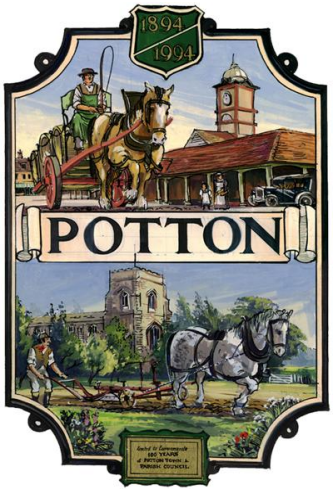

Potton Town Council

Media Communications Protocol

Date Adopted: July 2018
Reviewed: 5th May 2026
Next Review Date: May 2027

THE PROTOCOL

Local Government publicity is guided by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The Code is statutory guidance and therefore Councils must have regard to it and follow its provisions.

Failure to follow the revised protocol could lead to a breach of the statutory Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Council's reputation.

It is important that all Members and officers who might come into contact with the media understand the implications of this code. The Council's protocol explains this within a local context.

Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to ensure that the messages put out by the Council are consistent and accurate. However, if communication is managed effectively, the Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with stakeholders and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

This protocol acts as a simple reference tool for any officer or Member who might need to engage with the media. It can clarify roles and responsibilities and help manage expectations.

1. **Introduction**

   Potton Town Council receives enquiries from the media every year, issues several news releases, organises photo opportunities, arranges broadcast interviews and produces its own quarterly newsletter within the local press.

   The purpose of this protocol is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Town Clerk, all officers and Members involved in dealing with the media, and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest.

   The Council recognises the need for openness and this should be reflected in how the media communications are dealt with.

   The aim of the protocol is to ensure that the Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner. In all cases, the Council's approach to the media should be:

   - open and honest
   - proactive
   - responsive and timely

2. **The Legal Context**

   This protocol reflects the guidance contained in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2001 (as amended). The protocol should be read in conjunction with the Members Code of Conduct, the Staff Handbook, the Protocol for Member/Employee relations and the Principles of Good Practice. All publicity will be produced in line with the Council's equality and diversity guidelines.

3. **Potton Town Council's Approach to Publicity**

The media plays a huge role in informing residents about what the Council does and how it spends their money (at all tiers of Government). It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible will take a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews.

This approach will help achieve the following objectives:

- Ensure that the Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and which listens
- Share and celebrate the Council's successes
- Give information about policies and services and about the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Council's work
- Handle negative issues clearly and decisively

4. **The Media**

The local press generally only covers stories relevant to people living and working in Potton and the immediate surrounding areas. They include newspapers such as the Biggleswade Chronicle (paid for) and the The Advertiser (free). Other local media include radio stations such as BBC Three Counties and Biggles FM all of which have specific target audiences.

Regional media includes the two regional television stations - BBC (Look East) and ITV Anglia.

It is unlikely that Potton Town Council would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level however the protocol remains pertinent in these cases.

The Internet and social media is the fastest growing area of the media. All broadcasters and newspapers now also provide online news services about what is happening in Potton and with Potton Town Council.

5. **Identifying Newsworthy Items**

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Council to identify worthy news items and this should be done as early as possible. These might include Chairman engagements, Council run events, the Christmas Lights etc or promoting successes of the Council. The Town Clerk will make the decision as to whether a news or press release should be issued.

6. **Handling Media Enquiries**

The Town Clerk will co-ordinate all media enquiries into the town office. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the Lead Officer or the Chairman of the Committee to respond to the enquiry.

Officers who are directly approached by a member of the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without gleaning the full facts and should confer with the Town Clerk before responding. However simple, factual queries will be dealt with by appropriately at the town office.

Members who are directly approached by a member of the media may respond in accordance with the guidance contained in this protocol.

The Council should not pass comment on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. The Council is open and accountable and should always explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

7. **News or Press Releases**

News / press releases are one of the key techniques for publicising Council activities, decisions and achievements.

There are two types of press releases – Official Council Press Releases and Councillor Press Releases.

Official Council Press Releases - An official Council release is made on behalf of the Council as a whole; it will be written by an officer and issued by the Town Clerk. It is non-party political and will normally include a quote from the relevant Councillor(s). This is usually the Chairman of the Council or Committee Chairman.

Official Council press releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Council, contain relevant facts and include an approved quotation from the appropriate Councillor. Matters of style, presentation, punctuation, grammar etc are the responsibility of the author.

Releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Councillors, identify a Member's political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official Council news/press releases will be placed on the Council's website within three working days of issue.

It should be borne in mind that a news or press release is not always the best way to publicise an activity or event and alternative ways of advertising it should be considered e.g. posters, mailings, websites, social networking etc.

Councillor Press Releases - Councillor press releases are personal and are written and issued by the Councillor responsible. This release may or may not be political and should not include the name of any officer, use the Council crest or the Council telephone number as a point of contact. It would be beneficial for copies of intended releases, especially those of a factual nature, to be provided to the Town Clerk.

Councillors seeking advice can either contact the Town Clerk or the Monitoring Officer at Central Bedfordshire Council.

8. **Interviews**

Any officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview should refer the journalist to the Town Clerk, the Chairman or the appropriate Committee Chairman. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist.

Officers should never give their opinion on specific Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages. Their role is to provide expertise and factual knowledge only, in support of the Council's approved and agreed policies.

9. **Media Activity Ahead of Meetings**

Members of the media are welcome to attend and regularly do attend Council and Committee meetings. During meetings Members should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture, rather than relying on the journalist's interpretation of what can be a complex issue or report.

10. **Publicity in Election Periods**

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (Purdah) all proactive publicity about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local, national or European elections.

During this period council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity.

In these circumstances, where a quote is required, the relevant officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this protocol.

11. **Non-Council Related Media Activity**

Officers and Members of the Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-Council related organisations must not refer to their Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Council related organisation.

12. **Managing Negative Issues**

From time to time the Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Members and Officers must alert the Town Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest comes to light. They should not wait until contact is made by the media.

Members and Officers must be prepared to work with together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Council about an issue.

13. **Correcting Inaccurate Reporting**

Should the media (a newspaper or broadcaster) publish/broadcast something inaccurate about the Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

The issue should be discussed with the Town Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. Also to decide who the most appropriate person is to take the necessary agreed action i.e. the Chairman, Committee Chairman or Lead Officer.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain. Each case must be judged individually.

Occasionally the Council will get something wrong. In these cases damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by holding hands up, apologising, and stating how we are going to learn from the error or put it right.

14. **Quarterly Newsletter**

Quarterly, the Council creates its own newsletter that is distributed. It aims to promote council policies, services, activities and initiatives. The content is created in house in consultation with any appropriate Councillors. Ideas for articles will be welcomed and these should be passed directly to the Town Clerk.

15. **Monitoring and Evaluation**

The Council office will continually monitor the media coverage and collate statistics which will be circulated to all Members.

16. **Freedom of Information and Data Protection**

Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Should the Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (email or written), normally that correspondence would have to be disclosed, unless it was exempt. The fact that the disclosure of the correspondence may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure.

In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data. The Data Protection Act 1998 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

17. **Internet Acceptable Use Policy**

Internet use covers all websites, networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Bebo etc, forums and blogs which may be used by both Officers and Councillors.

If the above are used in an official capacity or on Council related business, the guidance in this protocol must be adhered to and they must be used in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Under the consideration of Acceptable Use, when acting in the capacity of Potton Town Council, websites should not:

- Contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- promote any political party or used for campaigning
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- be used for personal campaigns
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner

If social media is used in an unofficial capacity, Members and Officers should restrain from making remarks that could be construed as bringing the Council into disrepute.

The above points should provide useful guidance to prevent misinterpretation.

18. **Young People and Publicity**

Guidelines should be followed if commissioning photographs (i.e. under 18 years of age) or if planning photography of children at events and using visual media for publicity purposes.