

Supplements to Standing Orders

1. Public Relations

Public Relations

Contacting the Media and Writing a News Release

Personal contact with reporters at local newspapers or radio/tv programmes can often lead to very good coverage of a newsworthy issue.

A good photo opportunity will usually attract media interest and sometimes result in TV coverage.

News Releases

All local media operate with a bare minimum of reporters, who have a restricted capacity to attend meetings, news conferences and events or to undertake extensive background reading or research. Consequently, news editors will usually welcome a timely, well-written release that provides them with a ready-made story. Here's how to maximise the chances of your release being used.

- It's a **news** release. It has to contain **news**.
- It's a news release. Don't offend the radio and TV stations by heading it 'Press Release'.
- Keep everything short - a short release ideally no longer than one **side of A4**, using short **paragraphs**, short **sentences** and **short, non-technical words**.
- Give it a short, simple headline to identify **the story**.
- Include the six basic elements - what, **who**, **when**, **where**, **why** and how. The sequence will depend on the nature of the story.
- Include the main information - some or all of what, who, when, where - in the opening paragraph
- Use the remaining basic elements in the second paragraph.
- Progressively add details in descending order of significance. Bear in mind that subeditors like to prune stories from the bottom up, so all the main points must come near the start.
- Include a quote from someone connected with the story.
- Write the story in terms that make it relevant **to local people**.

- Word the story in the third **person** (“*The council has*” rather than “*we have*”) - then use quotes to personalise it. And because there is only one Great Doings Parish Council it takes the **singular verb**.
No jargon! Jargon exists to preserve a profession’s mystique. Ordinary folk and journalists either don’t understand it (which is bad) or misunderstand it (which is worse).
- If you use acronyms or initials, spell them out the first time you mention them unless they are in common usage (like TV) - and don’t separate the initials with full stops.
- Never start a sentence with a numeral. Numbers one to ten inclusive should be spelt out, thereafter use numerals.

How to lay out a news release

The recipient of your news release will want to transform it into typescript or a broadcast script with the minimum of *work*. Lay it out in a helpful way and you will increase the chances of it being used.

- Use A4 paper with your Councils logo and appropriate heading.
- Use a clear, uncluttered typeface such as Helvetica, Garamond, Times or NC Schoolbook in a reasonable size no smaller than 10pt. no larger than 14pt.
- Type double spaced using one side of the paper only.
- Allow wide margins (ideally 4cm at left and at least 2cm at right).
- Leave a line space between paragraphs.
- No sub-headings, even in a long release.
- No underlining (an underline instructs the typesetter to set in italic).
- Restrict Initial capital letters to the beginning of sentences and to proper nouns -and no CONSTANT CAPITALS - stick to lower case.
- Use single inverts round quoted speech.
- Type ‘ends’ after the final paragraph of the release. In addition, if your release extends beyond one side of A4 and you can’t bear to cut, type ‘more follows’ at the bottom of the first page.
- Proof-read It carefully and double-check the spelling.

Other information that must appear on the sheet, but clearly separated from the story itself. are:

- The date the release is issued.

- The name and telephone number of the person to contact if any clarification or further information is required. (Make sure that person is available on the day the media receive the release!)
- You may decide in certain circumstances to include some additional background information with the release. This should be placed at the end and be headed 'Notes for editors'.

Distributing a news release

- Only send to the media covering the area to which your news relates otherwise you will be wasting time and money as well as irritating the recipient.
- Only send to the media for which **it is appropriate**. Television needs stories with a strong visual content; radio prefers stories which offer opportunities to feature several voices: weekly newspapers don't like running stories that TV has featured several days earlier.
- When you have decided on the appropriate media, **get** your timing right. This is particularly important with weekly publications - if you just miss one week's deadline your news could become too stale for the following week's issue.
- Address the release to the news editor rather than to a named reporter. If the reporter is away from work when the release arrives there is a risk that the envelope will not be opened in time. For big or specialist stories you shouldn't be using a news release; you should be using personal contact with a named reporter, as indicated in the introduction to these notes.
- If deadlines are perilously close, send your release by **fax**.
- Keep a copy of past releases on file so that you can maintain a "House Style" and ensure consistency when giving information about an ongoing story.
- Don't pester reporters with phone calls checking whether they've received your release or asking whether they are going to use your news. Few things are designed to make you more unpopular with journalists

How to get the media to turn up to an event

To have a ribbon-cutting local dignitary gazing at an empty space instead of at a bevy of flashing cameras can be hugely embarrassing - for you more than for the dignitary. You invited the media because you wanted some publicity, and the inconsiderate devils didn't turn up! That's why it's wise always to hire a photographer (or coerce a camera-owning councillor) to record your event, just in case.

Press photographers (including freelancers)

- Identify the media you are hoping to attract - find out when they go to press.

- Organise your event **at least 48 hours before the press deadline.**
- Photographers are in heavy demand in evenings and at weekends and they can't be in two places at once. Steer well **clear of these times.**
- For weeklies **Fridays before 2.00pm and Mondays before 4.30pm** are probably the best times for getting photographers to turn up. For the regional dailies, try **weekdays before 2.30pm.**
- Send **a news** release to the relevant news editors, timed to arrive in the middle of the week prior to your event. Make sure it states prominently **'Photo Opportunity'**.
- Give just enough information to tempt the news editor to send a photographer, and **be precise about where and when** the event is taking place.
- The photographer needs to be able to find you easily, take the pictures rapidly and go on to the next call. Don't **keep press photographers hanging around!**
- Make sure you have got readily available all the information the photographers are likely to require, like the correct spelling of people's names.
- Let the photographers take the shots **they want** - don't try to do their job for them. Often they will want to shoot something different to (or in addition to) the 'opportunity' you have set up - especially if rival newspapers are represented.
- If the event includes refreshments make sure you offer them to the photographers - but don't be surprised if they refuse.

For Television crews all the same advice applies, plus

- Organise your event in **the morning** if you are hoping to attract TV. The main regional TV news programmes are broadcast in the early evening so the footage must be back at the studio by early afternoon.
- Crews have to travel from Bristol, Taunton, and or Weymouth and Plymouth. Don't time your event any earlier than 10:00am The ideal time is between 10:30 and midday

Handling calls from the media

There may be times when you are pestered by reporters you don't know Don't panic. Use this six-point 'survival plan' for handling such calls. It is relevant to staff and members alike, and is adapted from a plan produced by Coventry City Council public relations department.

1. WHAT'S THE STORY?

- If you're not absolutely sure what story they're following up, ask them.
- Do you know anything about it?
- Are you the best person to speak?
- Staff - stick to the facts: don't be talked into letting slip an opinion: refer them to an appropriate member for a political comment.
- Members - stick to policy/politics and don't get bogged down in operational details:
refer them to the appropriate officer who will have the file handy.
- Get as much information as possible - and keep a note.

2. WHAT'S THE DEADLINE?

- Avoid giving an off-the-cuff answer if at all possible. Ask how long you've got to prepare your response. They'll always tell you it's tight (sometimes it is').

3. WHY YOU?

- Ask yourself what they think you'll add to their story.
- Then ask them.
- Ask nicely.

4. WHO ELSE IS TALKING?

- Try to find out who else they have spoken to, or are planning to speak to. This will give you clues about the angle that they are taking.

5. CREATE THINKING SPACE

- Say you'll call them **back**.
- Collect your thoughts and any information you might need. Decide how best to use the interview.
- Then call them back.

6. THEN SAY IT

- When you've decided your line, say it.
- Then stick to it!