

## **Media Protocol**

**Agreed by Full Council, 11 July 2012**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this protocol is to provide a framework in which the communications work of the Council can be undertaken in a consistent, professional, transparent and non-party-political manner.

### **Context**

Newsworthy public services and democratic decision making, means the authority is constantly under the media spotlight.

The Council recognises the important role the media plays in informing the public and in helping the authority to communicate with residents and other stakeholders.

Everyone who works for, or on behalf of, the Council – staff, elected members and contractors – has a role in protecting its reputation.

The Council uses media communications as one of a number of tools to present its decisions, services and policies effectively and to protect its reputation.

### **Principles**

Underpinning all aspects of this protocol is the general principle, enshrined in government legislation, that the Council will not involve itself in any publicity which appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.

The Council also aims to be open in its workings, ensure information is accessible, encourage public involvement in decision making and promote the interests of the District's residents.

In addition to the general principles above, all Council communications will comply with relevant legal requirements (and conform to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity, issued by the Secretary of State in March 2011, which highlights factors to be borne in mind when taking decisions on publicity (see: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1878324.pdf> ).

For the purposes of guidance for Councillors and Officers, paragraphs 16 and 34 are particularly relevant and are reproduced below.

**16.** Any publicity describing the council's policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on the facts or explanation or both. Local authorities should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy. It is acceptable for local authority publicity to correct erroneous material which has been published by other parties, 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. Such publicity should seek to explain the facts in an objective manner.

**34.** During the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, local authorities should not publish any publicity on controversial issues or report views or proposals in such a way that identifies them with any individual members or groups of members. Publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published by local authorities during this period unless expressly authorised by or under statute. It is permissible for local authorities to publish factual information which identifies the names, wards and parties of candidates at elections.

Operational arrangements for the sign-off of press releases and reactive statements are managed through a formal press-release and reactive statement sign off process.

### **Media Liaison – Officer Roles and Responsibilities**

All media liaison on behalf of the Council is carried out via the Council's Communications Team.

The Communications Team aims to provide an efficient and professional service to the media, treat media outlets fairly and provide a range of services related to protecting the reputation of the Council and providing information. These services include writing and issuing press releases and statements, organising interviews and photo-calls, monitoring media coverage and giving advice on media handling. Various social media tools are also used.

Journalists and reporters work to firm publication deadlines, and officers and members should make every effort to meet these. With instant online news a feature of modern journalism, journalists are seeking very fast response times from us which we must strive to meet. The Council aims to issue news releases to the media within two working days of an event or committee decision, or other newsworthy activity. The only exceptions to this are where it is in the Council's interest to set a different timeframe, and this should be agreed with the relevant

Portfolio Holder or Committee Chair in advance. This could be for legal or contractual reasons, or to join up with other related news items, for example.

Preparation and sign-off of council press releases is therefore a priority for officers and members. Press-releases should be drafted and circulated for sign off in advance of a newsworthy event, activity or committee meeting.

For events or meetings which are known about in advance, the Communications team requires 10 working days notice of a press release. Draft content must be provided at least 5 working days ahead of an event or other newsworthy activity to allow sufficient time to draft the press release and get sign-off.

For requests arising out of a meeting, or for unforeseen events, the Council still aims to issue press releases within two working days. In these circumstances, the Communications team will aim to send a draft press release to the relevant Portfolio Holder or Committee Chair by the end of the next working day following the meeting. In order to do this, they will need immediate access to the appropriate information.

The Communications Team monitors local newspaper coverage to enable the Council to respond to media comment and news as necessary, to gauge the impact of proactive communications activities and identify opportunities to protect its reputation effectively. If a story or letter published by the press is factually inaccurate, the Council may choose to respond, or ask for a correction. Any such response will be prepared in liaison with the relevant Head of Service and/or Portfolio Holder.

Occasionally, media enquiries do come in through indirect routes. Members of the Communications Team appreciate being kept up to date about all such enquiries to help them to manage reputation issues effectively.

To enable the Communications Team to respond appropriately to media enquiries, officers should aim to make the team aware of committee decisions, service developments and any incidents that may have communications' implications or that may pose a risk to the Council's reputation, at the earliest possible time.

Communications Officers rely on colleagues to ensure that the information provided is accurate and will never knowingly mislead or give false information to a journalist or reporter.

All incoming calls, requests and enquiries from the media are fielded initially by members of the Communications Team who will respond on behalf of the Council where appropriate.

Designated Communications Officers are empowered to make statements on behalf of the Council, presenting the agreed position and helping build and protect the Council's reputation. An operational sign-off procedure helps the Communications Team manage such communications. If a reporter requires a technical briefing, a senior officer may be asked to respond.

All media enquiries, releases and statements will be logged and will record response times, what was said, which officer gave the information to the media team and who has approved the response or release.

Where a statement is provided this will normally be attributed to the Head of Service, Portfolio Holder or designated senior officer who is providing the statement. In the interests of openness and accessibility, the Council will aim not to provide anonymous statements. This is also to protect individual Communications Officers from being repeatedly named in the local press in connection with negative news.

Newsworthy policy development issues and service developments will be profiled in news releases in consultation with the relevant Head of Service/Portfolio Holder, and with the Executive Leader and/or Chief Executive (or their deputies), as appropriate.

Interviews with media outlets arranged by the Communications Team will normally be undertaken by the relevant Portfolio Holder or where particular specialist or technical knowledge is required, by the Head of Service (or their deputies), as appropriate.

The Communications Team is responsible for arranging interviews; the relevant departmental officer is responsible for briefing the interviewee with input from colleagues, as appropriate.

## **Cabinet**

A forward plan is published on the Council's web site and agendas are issued in advance to media contacts.

Newsworthy issues may be reported via news release. Pre-meeting press releases may be issued prior to the meeting to help inform debate.

All news releases are subject to a sign-off procedure which is managed by the Communications Team. As set out above, the Council aims to issue all press releases within two working days of the meeting.

Media statements on Cabinet decisions will be made by the appropriate Portfolio Holder (or deputy), or the Executive Leader (or deputy) and issued on behalf of the entire Cabinet.

Interviews on Cabinet decisions will be given by the appropriate Portfolio Holder (or their deputy) or the Executive Leader (or deputy).

Where the Communications Team is asked to draft media releases or letters on behalf of Cabinet or Portfolio Holders, such releases/letters will be of a factual nature, will contain nothing that could be construed as politically motivated or biased, and will be prepared in liaison with the Portfolio Holder and relevant Head of Service, or their deputies.

Portfolio Holders will be given relevant support and advice to enable them to play a proactive role in presenting issues to the media, explaining their work and managing controversial issues covered by the media.

All official media releases will be issued by the Council's Communications Team in the standard format.

### **Overview and Scrutiny**

The work undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny committees is an integral part of the Council's political arrangements.

Agendas are issued in advance to media contacts.

Media statements and interviews on Overview and Scrutiny matters will be made by the relevant Chair (or deputy).

Newsworthy issues may be reported via news release. Pre-meeting press releases may be issued prior to the meeting to help inform debate. As set out above, the Council aims to issue all press releases within two working days of the meeting.

Where the Communications Team is asked to draft media releases on behalf of an Overview and Scrutiny committee, such releases will be of a factual nature, will contain nothing that could be construed as politically motivated or biased, and will be prepared in liaison with the Chair of the Committee and relevant Head of Service, or their deputies.

All official Overview and Scrutiny media releases will be issued by the Council's Communications Team in the standard format.

Chairs (or deputies) of Overview and Scrutiny committees will be given relevant support and advice to enable them to play a pro-active role in presenting issues to the media, explaining their work and managing controversial issues covered by the media.

## **Full Council**

Agendas are issued in advance to media contacts.

Newsworthy issues may be reported via news release. Pre-meeting press releases may be issued prior to the meeting to help inform debate.

Media statements on policy and other matters which are the remit of Full Council will be made by the Executive Leader of the Council (or deputy). As set out above, the Council aims to issue all press releases within two working days of the meeting.

Media enquiries coming into the Council's Communications Team on such matters will be referred to the Executive Leader (or deputy).

Where the Communications Team is asked to draft media releases on behalf of Full Council, such releases will be of a factual nature, will contain nothing that could be construed as politically motivated or biased, and will be prepared in liaison with the Executive Leader and relevant Head of Service (or their deputies), and/or the Mayor.

All official Full Council media releases will be issued by the Council's Communications Team in the standard format.

The Executive Leader (or deputy) will be given relevant and appropriate support and advice to enable him/her to deal effectively with the media.

## **Other Committees (including Licensing and Planning)**

Agendas are issued in advance to media contacts.

Media statements and interviews will be made by the relevant Chair (or their deputy). Pre-meeting press releases may be issued prior to the meeting to help inform debate. As set out above the Council aims to issue all press releases within two working days of the meeting.

Where the Communications Team is asked to draft media releases, such releases will be of a factual nature, will contain nothing that could be construed as politically motivated or biased, will be issued in the standard format, and will be prepared in liaison with the Chair of the Committee and relevant Head of Service, or their deputies.

Chairs (or deputies) of committees will be given relevant support and advice to enable them to play a pro-active role in presenting issues to the media, explaining their work and managing controversial issues covered by the media.

## **Quotations**

Quotations from Portfolio Holders, Councillors and Officers in Council press releases should meet the requirements of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. They should be factual, non-political and objective. Quotations should be concise and appropriate to the context of the news release.

## **Commenting on Confidential Reports**

Reports made on blue paper contain confidential information. Information contained within the report has met the criteria as set out in the schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The information contained within such a confidential report, and any discussions undertaken during the meeting regarding the report, are strictly confidential and **MUST NOT** be disclosed.

## **Political Group Press Releases**

The Council's Communications Team has no involvement with political group press releases; these are a matter for the individual parties. Should the Communications Team receive an enquiry based on a press release sent out by a political group they will refer the journalist or reporter to the Group Leader (or deputy) for a response.

However, the Communications Team may give answers to purely factual questions, which may emerge from such releases, where they relate to the work of the Council.

## **Individual Councillors**

The work of individual Councillors is recognised as an important contributor to the Council's community leadership role.

Each local group/party makes its own arrangements for dealing with the media and publicity. Councillors should, in the first instance, consult with their Group Leader, Deputy Leader or Party Whip for guidance or support on media issues.

The principal of even-handedness enshrined in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (March 2011) has the effect that publicity about the Council does not seek to affect support for a single Councillor or group. The Publicity Code does, however, recognise that, at times, it is acceptable to associate publicity with a single member of the Council, where, for example one Councillor has been the face of a particular campaign.

General advice and guidance is available to Councillors on promoting local issues through the media. Members of the Communications Team appreciate it when Councillors keep them informed about media enquiries they receive.

### **Mayoralty**

Media communications support is provided by the Communications Team for mayoral activities relating to the voluntary sector, public participation in local democracy and civic and ceremonial events. A communications programme for the mayoral year is developed with the Mayoral team at the beginning of the mayoral year. As set out above, the Council aims to issue all press releases within two working days of the event, meeting or other newsworthy activity.

### **Officers**

The officer's Code of Conduct states that all contact with the media should be conducted through, or in consultation with, the Communications Team. If an employee wishes to write to a newspaper where they can be identified as a Council employee, they must first obtain permission from their senior manager or Head of Service.

Claire Wainwright  
Principal Communications Officer  
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