

## **Media protocol**

Version 1.1

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## **Introduction – the powers the council has to communicate**

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity states that:

*“Councils have a variety of statutory powers which enable them to produce publicity and to circulate it widely, or to assist others in doing so. Those commonly used include the powers in sections 111, 142, 144 and 145 of the Local Government Act 1972, sections 69, 88 and 90 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 and sections 15 and 16 of the Local Government and Planning (Scotland) Act 1982; but there are several others.*

*Some of these powers relate directly to publishing authority functions. Others give a more general discretion to publicise matters that go beyond an authority’s primary responsibilities. For example, sections 142 (1A) of the 1972 Act and 88 (1) of the 1973 Act authorise local authorities to arrange for the publication within their area of information as to the services available in the area provided by them or by other local authorities; and Section 54 of the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 empowers local authorities to arrange for the publication within their area of information on questions relating to health or disease.”*

More recently, local authorities have been permitted to comment on issues which are outside of the council’s area of responsibility, but that have an impact on the community using well-being powers of the Local Government Act 2000.

In addition, authorities now have a duty to inform, consult and involve, as set out in Part 7, Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. This has been supported by other recent legislation including section 242 of the NHS Act 2006 and the more recent Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill which became law in November 2009.

## **Why we need a media protocol**

In order that publicity is well co-ordinated, legal and cost effective, it is necessary to have a media protocol in place for the organisation.

This protocol is designed to provide councillors and officers with clear guidance to follow specifically when dealing with the media.

## **Scope**

It applies to all employees of the council and all councillors. It also applies to arms length and partner organisations when they are delivering services on the council's behalf. Other partnership protocols are set out on page 23.

## **Our principles for media communication**

Our communication with the media will be:

- Open – honest and transparent
- Consistent – in message and in delivery
- Responsive – proactive and timely
- Accurate – factual and correct
- Accessible – inclusive and representative
- Legal.

## **Our objectives**

*“The main purposes of local authority publicity are to increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs.”* Recommended Code on Local Government Publicity

### **The objectives of council media handling are to:**

- Improve people’s understanding of the work of the council and to provide information about how to access its services.
- Support the delivery of the council and borough strategic objectives.
- Defend the council from inaccurate and unfounded criticism by ensuring the public are informed of relevant facts.
- Protect and enhance the council’s reputation as the deliverer of high quality services and as an employer of choice.

### **We will do this by:**

- Forming and maintaining positive relationships with local, regional and national media, including trade.
- Having a co-ordinated approach to media handling, linking it in with wider communications activity and taking a campaign based approach wherever possible.
- Taking a proactive approach to media planning, using a key events calendar to plan ahead.
- Issuing media releases and responding to media enquiries in line with the agreed principles of openness, consistency, responsiveness, accuracy, accessibility and legality.
- Actively promoting decisions of the council in a way that people understand.
- Being clear about the legal framework within which we operate and clearly explaining roles and responsibilities to ensure the highest standards of conduct.
- Maintaining portfolio links with services and with councillors where relevant to enable a good flow of information to and from the media.
- Ensuring fair and accurate representation of the council and the borough across all communication. This includes ensuring adequate and non stereo-typical representation of all communities in the borough.
- Maintaining accurate records relating to media contact.
- Challenging inaccurate reporting in the media and reporting suspected media leaks/breaches of the code of conduct (officer and member) to the council’s Monitoring Officer.
- Using media enquiries as a way to drive service improvements where appropriate.
- Working with services, partners and members to develop media awareness.
- Continually developing the skills and knowledge of staff in the Corporate Communications Team.
- Monitoring our performance and taking feedback to ensure continuous improvement.

## Media relations and the law

Council publicity is strictly controlled by a Code of Practice established under the Local Government Act 1986. This code sets out rules around content and style of publicity, dissemination, advertising and promotion of individual councillors.

The whole of the code can be found here: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/rf/153169.rtf>

Councils face more legal restrictions than private bodies when it comes to external publicity. Most importantly, councils cannot publish material which appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.

However, this should not stop the council from conducting consultation exercises, promoting effective and efficient use of local services, attracting tourists and investment, or influencing public behaviour on such matters as crime prevention or equal opportunities.

In addition to the laws set out in the Local Government Act and the Code, both councillors and officers are subject to particular restrictions in relation to the media.

Part 5 of the council's constitution covers the role and responsibilities of members and officers and also how they relate to one another. The whole constitution can be found on the council's website. Breaches of the member protocol may result in a complaint to the Standards Board for England and where the officer code has been breached, to disciplinary action.

In addition, when dealing with the media, both officers and councillors need to have particular regard for:

- The Data Protection Act (1998)
- The Disability Discrimination Act (1995)
- The Freedom of Information Act (2000)
- The Human Rights Act (1998)
- The Race Relations Act (1976)
- The Sex Discrimination Act (1975)
- The Contempt of Court Act (1981) and contempt at common law
- The Defamation Act (1996) and defamation at common law

## **Roles and responsibilities in relation to media handling**

### **The Corporate Communications Team**

The team handles all media enquiries and issues all media releases on behalf of the council, supports weekly media briefings with the Council Leader and co-ordinates other briefings as appropriate to the council's needs. About a quarter of the Corporate Communications Team's time is dedicated to media handling.

Strategically, the team is responsible for developing key messages about the council and for ensuring that the council's media handling is handled professionally and in accordance with the law.

The team's media handling is designed to support the delivery of the objectives defined on page 5.

The team also gives media advice to staff and also to councillors, when acting in their council, rather than their political, roles.

In addition, staff are responsible for overseeing media relations required under the emergency plan and for working collaboratively with other public sector partners on joint media releases and issues as required. All senior members of the team can be contacted out of hours for urgent or emergency purposes.

Staff in the team each look after a portfolio of work. This means that each Communications Officer looks after both media and wider communication for a cluster of services. This helps them to understand services in more depth in order to be able to communicate about them properly.

All senior members of the team have either journalistic or legal backgrounds and most have undertaken training relevant to the role (e.g. NCTJ or BJTC accredited degrees or post graduate studies, post graduate modules in public administration and law, CIPR qualifications).

The team structure is available on the council's intranet.

### **All councillors**

All councillors have a responsibility to ensure that they comply with the relevant legislation and with the council's constitution when dealing with the media.

### **Ward councillors**

Generally, it will not be possible for the Corporate Communications Team to issue media releases about individual councillors, except where they are working in their executive positions, or where they are chairing a particular committee.

Sections 39 to 42 of the publicity code state that:

*"The functions of a local authority are discharged by the council corporately. It is therefore inappropriate for public resources to be used to publicise individual councillors.*

*In the interests of public accountability, however, it may be appropriate to give publicity to the views or activities of individual members when they are representing the council as a whole: for example, when the chairman of a council speaks or acts as the first citizen of the whole community, or when a chairman of a committee opens a new scheme or launches a policy approved by the council or by his committee on the council's behalf.*

*For the same reason a local authority may justifiably in certain circumstances issue press releases reporting statements made by individual members. Examples of cases where such press releases may be appropriate are as reports of the discussion at the meetings of the council or committees, or quotations of comments made by leading members of the council in response to particular events which call for a particularly speedy reaction from the council.*

*This does not prevent a member of staff of a local authority from responding to questions about individual members, since that is not publicity as defined in the 1986 Act."*

Media releases about individual ward councillors cannot be issued except in exceptional circumstances and with the input of the council's Monitoring Officer.

However, it is recognised that ward councillors have a valuable community leadership role and as such they are encouraged to keep in regular contact with the local media to promote this aspect of their work directly.

The Corporate Communications Team can provide general media training and support to all members as required. This guidance should be non political in nature. Members can request this by contacting the team directly, or by contacting the council's Member Development Officer.

Where any media or communications support, for example, broadcast media training, is provided to a member, the same level of support must be available to all members if they request it.

A handy guide to what councillors and officers can – and can't do is contained at the back of this protocol.

### **Cabinet members**

The Cabinet is appointed by the council as a whole and is responsible for developing policy and for making decisions about council business. Each member of the Cabinet looks after a certain portfolio of services.

Where the media contacts the council about service delivery in these portfolio areas, communications officers would usually discuss the issue with both the Head of Service concerned (or his/her senior representative) and would work with the relevant Cabinet member to issue a statement, or to formulate a quote.

Where the media contacts the council about decision making by the Cabinet or by individual members, if a decision has already been reached, this is handled as described above, with an explanation about call in given to journalists as appropriate.

However, if a decision has not yet been reached, only factual information or explanation is given. Journalists are usually referred to the relevant report if it is available (and not restricted).

In the circumstances above, Cabinet members are always given first opportunity to be quoted, in order to promote open democracy. However, if they are unavailable, if the media requests an officer quote, or if the Cabinet member has given permission for the Head of Service to deal with the matter on his/her behalf, then the relevant Head of Service or senior officer may be quoted or interviewed instead.

Cabinet members should only be quoted in relation to activity and decisions in their own portfolio areas. They can only be supported in their cabinet role and not in their role as a member of a political party.

### **Heads of Service and Executive Leadership Team**

Heads of Service and the Executive Leadership Team are responsible for:

- Alerting the Corporate Communications Team to any potential activity or decisions that may be of media interest. They should do this through the contact for their service area, or, if the matter is of significance, via a senior member of the team.
- Ensuring that they are available to the Corporate Communications Team by providing relevant mobile numbers and responding in a timely way to calls and emails. They should not withhold information from the team simply because they do not wish to attract negative media, or because they do not see media handling as a priority.
- Ensuring information provided is accurate.

- Referring any direct media contact with the service to the Corporate Team. Ensure that media and communications are considered for every major project and that they work with the Corporate Communications Team to ensure plans and resources.
- Making staff in their service aware of the media protocol and ensuring that any contact from the media is referred directly and immediately to the Corporate Communications Team.

Heads of Service and ELT should also have a good general understanding of the law as it relates to local government communications and should support their communications contact to ensure that it is upheld.

### **Council Leader**

The leader of the council meets with the media weekly to update them on council business and to allow them to ask him/her questions in relation to the running of the council. These meetings are non political and are usually supported by a senior member of the Corporate Communications Team.

The Council Leader is also usually quoted in media releases or statements where the matter is of council or borough-wide significance, and/or where the issue crosses several portfolio areas.

The Council Leader may also be quoted when another Cabinet member is unavailable.

### **Deputy Leader**

If the Council Leader is unavailable, the Deputy Leader will assume the responsibilities as laid out above.

### **Mayor**

The Mayor, is, by definition, non-political. Mayoral communication is co-ordinated corporately and where there is high profile event taking place, specific media releases will be prepared for this. The Mayor's calendar is sent to the media on a weekly basis.

The Mayor will only ever be quoted in relation to his/her mayoral role.

### **Township chairs**

Townships have devolved powers which give them decision making powers over certain areas of council business, and an influencing role across several others.

Where devolved decisions are made, the township chair will be quoted in media releases, statements or interview.

Where decisions have not yet been taken, a factual response will be provided to the media, referring to the relevant report (unless restricted) and supplying basic information or explanation.

Where townships play an influencing role, it would be usual for factual information to be provided and for an explanation to come from the Township Chair if required.

Individual councillors will not normally be quoted on township issues.

### **Committee chairs**

On occasion, it may be relevant to issue media releases on behalf of committee chairs. More likely is that the media will ask question about the decisions or recommendations made by a particular committee.

Where this is the case, the Corporate Communications Team will work directly with the service and committee chair concerned to provide answers which are of a factual nature. These will either be provided as factual explanations, or as a quote from the committee chair, depending on the circumstances.

It is particularly important when dealing with committee coverage to ensure that any answers provided to the media do not speculate on outcomes.

When dealing with planning matters, both officers and councillors should familiarise themselves with Part 5 (d) of the council's constitution – *The Code of Conduct for Members and Officers Dealing with Planning Matters*.

### **Monitoring Officer**

It is the role of the council's Monitoring Officer to ensure that the law is upheld and to ensure that operational protocols, including this media protocol, are developed within the appropriate legal framework and implemented legally and properly.

In the event of alleged breaches to the protocol, these will in the first instance be discussed with the Monitoring Officer and, if necessary, will then be dealt with under the usual arrangements for breaches of the constitution, the code of conduct, or in the same way as other legal matters as appropriate.

## **Media response times**

The immediacy of the media means that most news outlets will expect a response the same day. It is usual for journalists from online or broadcast outlets to expect a response sooner than that. It is common to be asked to turn around enquiries within an hour or two. In order to offer the level of service that the media expect, it is important that senior officers and councillors make themselves accessible to the Corporate Communications Team as required. In order for the process to run as smoothly as possible, it is usual for the team to agree an approach or comment over the phone and to email this to the officer and councillor concerned for final sign off.

The team aims to answer all media enquiries within 24 hours and will strive to respond to all reasonable requests within the journalist's deadline, whichever is sooner.

## **Out of hours responses**

The usual hours of operation for the Corporate Communications Team are 8.30am – 5.30pm Monday to Friday. The team also operates an out of hours contact list for urgent enquiries or emergencies. This list is available as part of the emergency plan. Details are also held at the contact centre and by all local media. The out of hours response service is restricted to urgent or emergency enquiries only.

Staff are not paid for being on call and any time they spent is taken equivalently in lieu rather than as additional payment. Where pre-planned out of hours activity is known to be taking place (for example late night or weekend events), the team plans for this in advance and is staffed appropriately. All out of hours responses are dealt with in accordance with this protocol – and should be logged in the media enquiries database at the next available opportunity.

## **Record keeping**

Proactive media releases and briefing notes are stored corporately. They include the date of the release, the author and the content (including any notes to editors).

Responses to media enquiries are stored in a media enquiries database that can be accessed by the whole team. The database captures: the time of contact; name and contact details of the journalist; the deadline that they are working to; the nature of the enquiry; the officer that is dealing with the enquiry; who the officer has spoken to for information; the response to the media and the time that the response was issued.

## **Distribution**

All standard media releases will be sent out to all contacts on the team's media distribution list. This list is updated regularly and includes all councillors, the Executive Leadership Team, Heads of Service and the Corporate Communications Team. They should also be uploaded to the media area of the council's website immediately after being sent out.

Non standard media releases are usually only used for the trade press and are usually adapted from the standard version. These are usually technical in nature and only sent to the media concerned.

Responses to reactive media enquiries should only be sent to the media concerned. They should then be copied to the three party leaders for information.

## Sign off protocols

All media releases and quotes must have both officer and member sign off before issue. This will usually mean the Head of Service (or his/her senior nominee) and the relevant Cabinet or committee member.

Communications officers should also check every release with a colleague before sending to ensure that any grammatical or spelling errors are corrected.

Media releases dealing with controversial or legal matters, including court cases, must also be signed off by an appropriately trained, senior member of the team (Kate Lindley, Stuart Clarkson or Mark Jones).

## Who to quote/put forward for interview

The Corporate Communications Team has a responsibility to ensure that the council's communication reflects the democratic accountability of the organisation and that it is legal.

This means that:

**Ward councillors** will not as a general rule, be quoted on any media releases or statements. It is recognised that ward councillors may wish to be interviewed or to comment on council policy or on specific issues in relation to their ward. This is seen as a welcome part of the normal democratic process and where this is the case, councillors should contact the media direct.

**The Leader of the Council** will be quoted or put forward for interview where there are any significant issues that affect the council or borough as a whole or that cross several portfolio areas. Where the Leader is not available, he/she may nominate a senior officer (usually the Chief Executive or a member of ELT) to take his/her place.

**Portfolio holders (Cabinet members)** will deal with issues that relate to council policy, or to operations in their own areas. Where they are unavailable, this may be carried out by the relevant senior officer, or by the Council Leader, as appropriate.

**Township chairs** will be quoted where townships have taken a devolved decision, or in order to explain the recommendation made for one over which they have influence.

**Committee chairs** will be quoted on all media enquiries relating to committee decisions.

On occasion, it may also be appropriate to seek quotes or input from **opposition leaders**. This will be done under the direction of the council's Monitoring Officer. Examples might include contributions to obituaries or issues that are of council or borough wide significance as determined by the Chief Executive.

## Promoting transparency

Wherever possible, communications officers will seek to avoid the use of the term "a council spokesman/woman" and will give preference to a named individual. This is to ensure that the council is – and is perceived to be, open and honest in its dealings with the media.

## Keeping councillors informed

In general, it is each Head of Service's responsibility to keep their portfolio holder, opposition portfolio holders, opposition leaders and specific ward councillors updated on any activities or issues that are relevant to them.

The role of the Corporate Communications Team is restricted to:

- Ensuring that relevant Cabinet members, township and committee spokespersons are contacted as required for statements, interviews and media releases.
- Ensuring councillors get copies of all media releases.
- Sending all reactive media responses to the three party leaders.

However, it is recognised that there are occasions when Heads of Service might not have had the opportunity to brief councillors before an issue is picked up by the media, or where the Corporate Communications Team may be the first to become aware of an issue by virtue of the work that they do.

Where this is the case and the issue is of **significance**, the team will:

- Notify the relevant Executive Leader and/or Head of Service/Senior Manager and request that they brief their portfolio holder and opposition portfolio holders and/or the Council Leader and opposition leaders immediately. (If necessary, the Corporate Communications Team can be instructed to do this on behalf of management).
- Ensure that the relevant senior officer has briefed councillors prior to issuing a response.

Determining whether a media issue is "significant" will be the role of the Communications Officer concerned. It is accepted that what might be significant to one person may not be significant to another. For this reason, the two tests that will apply in these circumstances are:

"Would I think less of the council if I was to hear about this story in the media?"

"Is this story likely to be of wider interest than to just this media outlet?"

Where proactive media releases are issued on matters of sensitivity, it will be the Head of Service's responsibility to keep members informed. The Communications Team will advise the Head of Service to do this and will circulate an embargoed copy of the release on their behalf.

## **Offering exclusives**

As a rule, the council prefers not to offer 'exclusive' coverage to one media outlet over another. However, there may be times when the council decides to exercise this tactic. In general, exclusives will only be applied when:

- There is a clear benefit to the council or the borough in doing so and where the same benefit could not be achieved by treating all media equally.

Or;

- Where a particular media has asked to cover an issue for a long time and where it is not likely to be of widespread interest to other media outlets.
- Where the issue is of particular relevance to a particular trade publication and would not necessarily be of wider audience merit.

Where exclusives are offered, they should first be discussed with either the Communications Manager or the Head of Customer Access. If approved in principle, they should then be discussed with the relevant Head of Service and councillor before final approval being sought via the relevant member of the Executive Leadership Team.

## **Media partnerships and campaigns**

On occasion, the council may be asked to run a campaign in partnership with the local media. Where this is the case, the council should consider whether the campaign helps to deliver against the objectives laid out on page 4.

The council may also decide to proactively approach a particular media outlet in order to work in partnership to deliver a particular outcome. Where this is the case, communications officers must be able to justify the decision on the same basis as the use of exclusives. The sign off process will also need to be the same.

At the start of any media partnership, media partners should be given a single point of contact within the council (usually a communications officer) and ways of working must be established at an initiation meeting. Please see page 22 for more information.

## **Embargoes**

Embargoes will be used sparingly. While most journalists do abide by them, they are not legally enforceable. However they are useful when we have a big announcement to make and journalists might want time to prepare background piece on it, or when we are doing something in tandem with another organisation, like the release of inspection results for example.

## **Day to day media handling**

### **Media releases**

Media releases are used to proactively issue information to the media. They must be signed off for accuracy by the relevant Head of Service or senior manager within the service concerned. Quotes will usually come from the relevant elected member. All media releases will be stored corporately.

### **Media enquiries**

Media enquiries that come to services should be forwarded immediately to the Corporate Communications Team. Any journalist contacting officers directly should be redirected.

If a member of the team is not immediately available, the officer contacted should take down the name and number of the journalist, the name of the organisation they are calling from and the details of the enquiry before passing this on to corporate communications immediately. Officers should not comment directly or indirectly on anything the journalist says.

Elected members who are contacted by journalists directly are at liberty to comment providing they operate within the Code of Conduct. They are however encouraged to alert the Corporate Communications Team to any enquiries where the council is likely to be asked to provide a response.

All media enquiries are logged on a media enquiries database. This records the date and time of the enquiry, the contact details of the journalist, the communications officer who answered it, who the officer spoke to to get the information internally, the response given, the date and time the query was responded to and any other relevant information.

Where the team is asked for a comment that is political in nature, media are referred to the relevant councillor/councillors directly.

The council never says no comment. Sometimes, for legal reasons, or for reasons of employee confidentiality, we are unable to comment on a particular issue. Where this is the case, we would usually explain that we are unable to comment and state why as part of a statement.

Information about individuals will only be given in order to correct inaccurate assumption (except where this may be damaging to the individual concerned) or when the individual gives their permission.

When asked about issues that involve other public sector or partner organisations, the Corporate Communications Team will first liaise with the organisation/s concerned.

### **Media interviews**

Often broadcast media in particular will request to interview a specific member of staff or councillor, or will ask the Communications Team for a speaker with specific characteristics (talkative, camera savvy etc). Wherever possible we try to accommodate all reasonable requests. In such instances we should keep the relevant councillors and officers informed and explain why a particular individual is being recommended instead of them.

Before media interviews, the role of the Corporate Communications Team is to arrange a site for the interview (if this is not already in hand), to agree key messages and to support with basic media training as required. If required, a communications officer can accompany officers or councillors to give further detail and to offer support. In such circumstances, attendance will depend on the relative demands on the team at the time.

### **Media briefings**

Media briefings take place weekly with the Leader of the Council. These are offered to all local media and attendance is rotated between organisations. Specific briefings may also be arranged for campaign launches.

## **News conferences**

News conferences are usually only used to announce something major or in the event of a major incident or emergency. The Corporate Communications Team will advise against holding a news conference unless they believe that there is likely to be significant interest. Journalists don't like having their time wasted – and one poor news conference can put an end to otherwise positive relations. A news conference will usually consist of the conference itself, a question and answer session and one to one interviews at the end. News conferences need to be planned well in advance and should be accompanied by media packs.

## **Responding to letters in the paper**

Letters to the paper are a good way of getting feedback. However, while they can sometimes be unpleasant - and, on occasion, inaccurate, very often responding to them will only add fuel to the fire and keep a story going. For this reason, all non political letters to newspapers should be first cleared through the council's Corporate Communications Team. Councillors may of course respond in their political capacity.

## **Social media**

The council is currently developing a social media protocol. This will set out how the council's approach to social media and the roles and responsibilities of officers and members.

## **Photography**

Photographs can add considerable value to a story and often make the difference between it being used as a NIB (News in Brief) and it making a full article.

There are two ways that we provide photographic material to the media – either by sending them photos that have already been taken, or by offering them a photo opportunity.

### **Supplied photographs**

Where images are supplied to the media, these will usually have been arranged by the Corporate Communications Team . The team either take these photographs themselves, or they employ a freelance photographer to do it. The approach they use depends on the importance of the story, the work programme of the team and the available budget within services.

Photos supplied to the media need to:

- Be of sufficient editorial quality for use
- Be of sufficient technical quality for use
- Ensure that they are representative of the borough/part of the borough
- Have relevant consents

Often the media ask for images that contain councillors to be sent along with images that don't, so they have a choice of what images they use. Councillors may be asked to move out of the frame once a few shots have been taken to allow this to happen.

Once taken, photographs are stored on a central database and may be used again in order

Because of copyright laws, where a freelance photographer is employed to take images, we agree in advance how the photographs will be used and this is factored in to the overall cost.

The Corporate Communications Team also maintains an up to date database of councillor and senior officer photographs that can be emailed to the media on request.

### **Consents**

There is nothing in the law that prevents anyone from taking images of people who are going about their day to day business on public land. However, there are laws relating to trespass, privacy and representation that photographers need to be mindful of. It is the council's protocol that consent is required before minors can take part in council photographs. This will usually be sought either directly from parents, or from the child's school. Anyone taking photos of children must be either CRB checked, or accompanied by another adult. It is considered best practice to obtain consent for all photography where it is practical to do so.

Where photographs are supplied to the team from services, it is the service's responsibility to obtain consent before the photographs can be used.

When we are photographing our own staff, it is not necessary to obtain formal consent providing staff have received a proper explanation about what the images will be used for, how they will be stored – and that they have had the option to opt out if they wish.

This guidance also applies to broadcast media.

Photographic and filming consent forms are available to download on the council's intranet. Once complete they need to be scanned and sent back to the Corporate Communications Team using the email address on the form.

## **Media handling during the election period**

During the run up to election, it is vitally important that media handling is properly controlled to ensure that there can be no allegation of political bias in anything that the council does. Although the laws relating to political neutrality apply at all times, in the election period, the laws relating to publicity become a lot stricter. This period is often referred to as “purdah”.

Publicity is defined in section 6 of the Local Government Act 1986 as ‘any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public.’ The Act covers the obvious forms of publicity – media releases, speeches and events, but applies equally to the less obvious – including officer attendance at events, the use of political colours in advertising, consultation events - and even the colour of floral displays.

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity says that ‘the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, known as purdah, should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.”

This means that during the election period, the council’s Corporate Communications Team will not issue any media release that could be seen as promoting the views of a particular political party, individual member of group of members. Media releases will not quote councillors during this period and members will not be photographed.

In order to ensure that all employees and members are aware of the restrictions during this period, the Corporate Communications Team will send out a briefing note to all councillors and all senior staff to remind them of their responsibilities at least six weeks before the election period begins.

## **Media handling during events**

For events to be successful and safe, strong media co-ordination is essential.

As a minimum, medium to large scale events require a media liaison officer to deal with all media enquiries and handling in the run up to the event and to manage media attendance on site at the event itself.

This should be a single point of contact with good judgement and with the authority to take immediate decisions relating to media-handling at the event itself.

The role of the media liaison officer is to:

- Create a media plan for the event (in liaison with colleagues as appropriate)
- Notify the media about the event
- Arrange and issue media passes ahead of the event if required
- Collate requests for interview/photography ahead of the event
- Liaise with other agencies and artist management to manage planned media requests
- Authorise media entry to the event
- Give appropriate instructions to the media at the event
- Manage any unplanned requests at the event
- Provide a de-brief after the event.

**In an emergency**

In the event of a major incident, emergency or break in business continuity, the Corporate Communications Team will liaise with the Emergency Planning Team and with the relevant command (usually the Executive Leadership Team) regarding the release of information to the media.

Depending on the situation, this may also involve liaison with other agencies such as the police, the fire service, or other authorities.

Specific media liaison plans are in place in the event of an emergency.

Please note that the priority in an emergency is public safety and as such it may not be possible to update councillors until later.

## Reporting legal proceedings

The law relating to the publication of information about court cases can be complex. Because of this, all staff in the team who have regular media contact receive specific training as part of their induction. To help staff on a day to day basis, a separate Court Reporting Protocol has been developed. The penalties for incorrect reporting of court cases can be severe – including a prison sentence. It is therefore vitally important that the Court Reporting Protocol is followed.

In general this means that:

- We would not normally comment on active legal cases, except to confirm factual details that are listed as part of normal court proceedings, or that were raised in open court.
- Publication of court proceedings should be accurate and contemporaneous (published in the next available edition) in order to retain privilege.
- Media releases should be sent out on the day of the court case, or at the latest, the day after that. The release should always contain the date of the court case. The onus is then on the media to ensure contemporaneous publication.
- Information should be restricted to the charges faced by the defendant, plea, admittance or conviction.
- Information in media releases should be restricted only to what was read out in open court. Submitted evidence not read out or evidence withdrawn should not be referred to.
- If an appeal is lodged, there are restrictions on what can be published. Information then needs to be restricted to the name of the defendant, conviction and the fact that an appeal has been lodged. This is to avoid prejudicing any future hearing.
- Any media comment or release relating to legal proceedings must be signed off by either Stuart Clarkson, Kate Lindley or Mark Jones, or referred to legal.

## Partnership working and working with inspectorates

Where other organisations are contracted to provide services on behalf of the council, they will be expected to follow this protocol.

In practice this will mean day to day collaboration between partner communication teams and the council's Corporate Communications Team.

This protocol will also be shared with all LSP partners in order that they understand the council's approach. Any changes to this protocol will be discussed at the regular LSP communications group meetings and copies will also be provided to client services.

In general, the council's approach to partnership media handling is that at the start of any partnership projects, the council should work with its partners to define:

- The overall objectives for media coverage
- The likely audiences
- Key messages
- Roles and responsibilities
- Clearance protocols
- Who speaks on behalf of the project
- How to handle difficult issues including disagreement and negative outcomes

Generally this will mean that:

- Publicity for each partnership project will be overseen by the organisation leading or co-ordinating that initiative.
- Where the lead partner is delivering services on behalf of the council, they will adhere to the council's protocol.
- Where the lead partner is not delivering services on behalf of the council, they should offer opportunities for comment as appropriate.
- All partnership media releases and comments should be signed off by all involved.
- If the partner leading the initiative does not have the resources to deliver communications activity this can be shared across partners as appropriate.
- Partner organisations should not use the media as a means to apportion blame, or to take sole credit for any partnership initiatives.

The council's Communications Team will also work in collaboration with the relevant inspectorates to ensure that the outcomes of inspection and performance results are communicated to the media in an agreed, accessible and accurate manner.

## **Our style and standards**

All media statements and releases are expected to comply with the council's Corporate Identity Guidelines and Style Guide. This is to ensure that they are easy for people to understand.

In their day to day work, communications officers must:

- Use plain language
- Be ruthless about cutting out jargon
- Ensure any technical terms, or acronyms are explained plainly and simply
- Check their work for factual accuracy and correct spelling and grammar before sending
- Be aware of the law
- Seek advice from management when dealing with potentially controversial or legal matters

Media releases should:

- Support the agreed objectives for council media handling
- Contain the basic facts of a story – who, what, where, when, why, how
- Generally be no longer than one and a half sides of A4
- Start with the most important or interesting fact
- Be structured logically and flow well
- Contain a quote, preferably from the relevant elected member
- Be accompanied by a relevant photograph or photo opportunity wherever possible
- Always include contact details
- Be signed off by a Head of Service or a senior manager on their behalf
- Be sent to all councillors and logged on the system

When dealing with media responses, we:

- Never say no comment – if we can't comment, we explain why
- Work to journalist deadlines and always respond within 24 hours, whichever is sooner
- Keep quotes simple. Quotes can be accompanied by more detailed explanation if required
- Quote relevant councillors, or Heads of Service as appropriate
- Attribute properly. Wherever possible, try not to use 'a council spokesman/woman said'
- Log all information on the media enquiries database
- Send a copy to all three party leaders

## Managing performance

Wherever possible, the impact of media handling is measured in relation to the outcomes it delivers.

Campaign related media coverage is usually measured as part of an overall campaign evaluation. Where this is the case, measurement will include:

- Inputs (staff time and cost)
- The advertising value equivalent (AVE)
- Consumer awareness of the campaign and its messages
- Whether the campaign delivered against its objectives (and to what extent the media had an impact on this).

The impact of ad hoc media releases is harder to measure. They tend to be measured by the impact that they have on the end result, for example, the number of people who attend a particular event or who take up a service as a result of reading about it in the media.

Where these events and services are in the direct control of the Corporate Communications Team they are recorded. Where they are in the control of services, we provide advice on how best to collate relevant performance information and ask services to feed this back to us. This is an area that requires more work to ensure that data is collected consistently to inform future development.

In addition, we use productivity, take up, cost and satisfaction measures to give us a balanced picture of our overall performance in relation to media handling. In doing this we take into account:

- Perceptions of and feedback from owners, editors and journalists
- Feedback from services and councillors
- The total volume of media releases issued and media enquiries answered
- The volume of unsatisfied demand (media enquiries not answered)
- Percentage of positive, negative and neutral coverage (weighted).
- Whether key messages are included in editorial
- Cost of staff time.
- Comparative data with other AGMA authorities and 'natural neighbours'.

## Handy guide for councillors

### Councillors:

- Must not issue media releases on behalf of the council. All council media releases are issued by the Corporate Communications Team.
- May issue political media releases, provided they do not imply that they are from the council, that they do not make promises on behalf of the council – and they are not compiled using council resources.
- Must not try to persuade officers to support them in their political objectives. Officers are only there to carry out the work of the council and to implement the decisions it takes. They cannot support members in a political capacity or help to deliver political aims.
- Must not give instructions to officers, other than through the formal decision making process. In particular, members must not instruct communications officers to issue media releases on their behalf. Members may, however, alert communications officers to particular events or developments that may require media coverage.
- Must be respectful of officers at all times. Where there are any concerns about a member of staff, this should be referred immediately to senior management (usually the relevant Head of Service).
- Must not contact officers outside of working hours except where permission has been given and where the matter is urgent.
- Have a responsibility to understand the restrictions placed on them under the Code of Conduct and in relation to the law as it applies to local government communication.
- Must not provide the media with information that has been obtained confidentially in their role as a councillor.
- Must not provide inaccurate information to the media. When making comments about the council, councillors are advised to check the accuracy of information with the relevant senior officer first.
- Must not make promises to any media outlet about what the council's communications officers will, or won't, do. In particular, councillors must not promise editorial "exclusivity" or suggest that the council will, or won't advertise in a particular outlet.
- Must always state in what capacity they are speaking to the media and what their role is in relation to the issue in question.
- Must raise any concerns they have about the conduct of employees with senior management.