

A Media Protocol for East Herts Council

Communication between the Council and the public is vital for access to services and for local democracy.

Because we recognise the importance of the media to effective public communications, we have produced this protocol which sets out:

- the professional support offered by the Communications Team
- the roles of Members and officers in media relations
- the legal framework for publicity
- a formal account of media relations practice at East Herts.

It is designed to help everyone in the Council to work more effectively together and with our contacts in the local or national media.

The Role of the Communications Team

The purpose of the Communications Team is to increase public awareness of the Council's services and functions, to explain to the public and stakeholders what the policies and priorities are and to support the organisation in gathering public views on services, policies and priorities.

It fulfils this role through the production of press releases, responding to press enquiries, press briefings, production of Link magazine, and the hosting of conferences and media events.

The Communications Team provides officers and Members with support on any communications matter that relates to the reputation of the Council as a whole, its policies and its services.

Who speaks for East Herts Council to the Media?

As democratically elected and publicly accountable representatives, the Members of East Herts are the primary spokesmen for the Authority with the media. Only Councillors who hold particular positions should be individually identified in publicity.

These should be taken as:

- Leader and other Committee Chairmen

- Chairman and Vice Chairman (in their ceremonial roles)
- Portfolio holders
- Overview and scrutiny Chairmen

Therefore:

The Leader is the main spokesman on cross cutting policies and issues at national level. Currently these include proposals on airport development, for example.

Executive Members are spokesmen for the Council in their respective portfolios.

Other **leading Members** (such as Chairmen of Scrutiny, Development Control and local forums) will be quoted and referred to in relation to issues within their own areas of expertise.

The Chairman will be the spokesman on all matters of a civic or ceremonial nature.

Officers are also important spokesmen for the Authority. Whilst the Communications Team can and will handle many factual enquiries, there will be many occasions when more specialist or technical information will be required.

In these instances it is expected that senior officers (**Executive Directors and Assistant Directors**) will handle media interviews.

Other officers, with the agreement of their respective AD, may also be the most appropriate person to handle media enquiries and this can be facilitated with support from the Communications Team.

Other officers

Officers who are contacted directly by the media without advance knowledge, agreement or preparation are advised to politely redirect the call to the Communications Team in the first instance.

Ward Councillors

The Communications Team is happy to advise **Ward Councillors** who are approached directly by the media for comment/interview but it is not a political resource.

The Legal Framework

Council resources can only be used for non party-political publicity of the work of the Council – not for criticism of the Council or of Council policies.

All Council publicity and media work is governed by provisions in the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986 and the Government’s Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 1988 as Revised 2001.

Collectively these pieces of legislation are intended to ensure that public money is not spent inappropriately on political communications. They require authorities to ensure that “Any publicity describing the Council’s policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both.” They also forbid Councils from publicity which could in any way be construed as being designed to “affect support for a political party”.

Council publicity should focus on publicising the democratically agreed policy.

Election time

Special restrictions apply during the period prior to elections.

The updated Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity requires that proactive publicity should be precluded in all its forms for candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election. Publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in such a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members.

NB: It is acceptable for the Authority to respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided that their answers are factual and not party political. Members holding key political or civic positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a Member level response to an important event outside the Authority’s control. Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve Members likely to be standing for election.

Consequently, no Councillors will be quoted in news releases produced by East Herts Council in the period leading up to an election.

Wider publicity initiatives also need to be considered carefully during this period.

In the advent of an election, it is possible that prospective candidates (Parliamentary, District, European or County) may request visits to Council services and premises. All candidates must be treated equally and there is no requirement for such requests to be refused. Council staff should not be included in any photographs that may be arranged during such visits.

Within East Herts the Communications Team and/or Legal Services colleagues are best placed to advise and support colleagues on any legal implications of publicity. If in doubt, their advice should also be sought.

General Media Relations Practice at East Herts

The Communications Team will promote:

- Agreed service initiatives in liaison with the Leader of the Council, Executive Directors and Assistant Directors.
- Agreed service initiatives as requested by senior managers in liaison with the Leader of the Council and appropriate Executive Members.
- The role of scrutiny within the overall democratic process, as the opportunity arises, in liaison with the Executive Directors and the Leader of the Council.
- Other activities and developments of the Council through news releases and publications, quoting officers of East Herts and partner organisations and/or service users, where their contributions add to the relevance and interest of the story.
- Ceremonial and cross-organisational events in liaison with the Chairman of the Council.

At Full Council & Executive Meetings

- Agendas will have been issued to the media in advance.
- Where appropriate, press releases will be issued following the meeting describing the decision and quoting the Leader or Executive Member as appropriate. Such releases will highlight key issues and will help to explain and publicise Council policies and services.
- Motions and questions from individual Councillors shown on the agenda will not be publicised through press releases.
- The Communications Team will respond to subsequent press enquiries by providing a factual explanation at officer level (either directly or through another officer). Where a matter of policy is in question, the matter will be referred to the Leader of the Council or the appropriate Executive Member. Interviews and photo opportunities will be facilitated.
- Where a reporter wishes to find out what was said by individual Councillors during a debate, officers will refer the reporter to the Councillor direct.

At Other Council Meetings

- Communications officers will respond to any press enquiries before the meeting by providing a factual explanation at officer level. Where a matter of policy is in question, they will consult the appropriate Chairman and inform the Executive Director and/or the Executive Member.
- If the meeting (e.g. Scrutiny) collectively agrees to issue a press release on any given topic, this will be prepared and issued by Communications Staff in consultation with and quoting the relevant Chairman following the meeting. These releases will be issued in line with the information item, factually describing the outcome.
- Where a matter of policy is in question, Communications Staff will advise the appropriate Chief Officer and/or Executive Member that a release is being issued and will respond to press enquiries

following the meeting by providing a factual explanation of the outcome at officer level, in line with the information item.

Political Communications

- The Communications Team can and will only provide professional non party-political communications advice to Members on request.
- Nothing in the protocol precludes any political group from issuing its own press information and making any other arrangements for media coverage.

Media Protocol July 2003

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