

# **Section 19 - Media Protocol**

## **19.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

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

## **19.2 The Role of the Communications Team**

19.2.1 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.

19.2.2 It fulfils this role through the production of content via the following printed media and digital media channels:

- (a) press releases and responses to press enquiries
- (b) press briefings
- (c) the hosting of photocalls and media events
- (d) electronic newsletters (network)
- (e) council website
- (f) council social media accounts (including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Youtube)

19.2.3 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.

### **19.3 Who speaks for East Herts Council to the Media?**

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

19.3.2 These should be taken as:

- (a) Leader and other Committee Chairmen
- (b) Chairman and Vice Chairman (in their ceremonial roles)
- (c) Executive Members

19.3.3 Therefore:

- (a) The Leader is the main spokesperson on cross cutting policies and issues at national level.
- (b) Executive Members are spokespeople for the Council in their respective portfolios.
- (c) Other leading Members (such as Chairmen of Scrutiny and Development Management) will be quoted and referred to in relation to issues within their own areas of expertise.
- (d) The Chairman will be the spokesman on all matters of a civic or ceremonial nature.
- (e) Officers are also important spokespeople for the Council. Whilst the Communications Team can and will handle many factual enquiries, there will be occasions when more specialist or technical information will be required.
- (f) In these instances it is expected that senior officers (Chief Officers and Heads of Service) will handle media interviews.
- (g) Other officers, with the agreement of the respective Head of Service, may also be the most appropriate person to handle media enquiries and this can be facilitated with support from the Communications Team.

## **19.4 Managing media enquiries**

- 19.4.1 Media enquiries will be responded to as soon as possible (within 24 hours), unless agreed otherwise.

19.4.2 Deadlines for enquiries can vary. The journalist making the enquiry will be asked for a deadline and the Communications Team will endeavour to respond within this timeframe.

19.4.3 In certain circumstances, the deadline will not be achievable, such as when several questions have been asked in one single enquiry or the relevant Officer is not available. In such cases, the journalist making the enquiry will be notified and an agreement reached as to a new response deadline.

19.4.4 The media enquiry process is as follows:

- (a) The media contact the council for a comment, clarification is sought on the topic and the deadline is checked and confirmed.
- (b) The Communications Team contact the relevant Officer(s) to request information
- (c) The Communications Team draft a response/statement
- (d) The Officer who provided the information and the relevant Head of Service asked to approve or amend the prepared statement
- (e) The statement sent to the Executive Member for amendments and approval
- (f) Statement is re-circulated with amendments if necessary
- (g) The Communications Team sends statement to the media.

## **19.5 Other officers**

- 19.5.1 Officers who are contacted directly by the media without advance knowledge, agreement or preparation are advised to politely redirect the request to the Communications Team.
- 19.5.2 All queries are subject to media deadlines. By missing a deadline, a story may appear without a council comment and the council's reputation could suffer. Contact from the Communications Team with a media query should be treated as a matter of priority and dealt with as soon as possible.
- 19.5.3 The Communications Officer should be provided with as much information as possible. The Communications Officer will agree with the Officer what goes in the public domain.
- 19.5.4 There are no circumstances where it would be acceptable to refuse to give a response. If the response is circumscribed, for example because of data or child protection issues, then the Communications Team will explain why in an official response.

## **19.6 Ward Members**

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

## **19.7 The Legal Framework**

- 19.7.1 Council resources can only be used for non party-political publicity of the work of the Council.

- 19.7.2 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.
- 19.7.3 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".
- 19.7.4 Council publicity should focus on publicising the democratically agreed policy and priorities.

## **19.8 Election time**

- 19.8.1 Special restrictions apply during the period prior to elections.
- 19.8.2 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.

Note: It is acceptable for the Council 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 Council's control. Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve Members likely to be standing for election.

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

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

19.8.5 In the advent of an election, it is possible that prospective candidates (including non-District elections) 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.

19.8.6 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.

## **19.9 General Media Relations Practice at East Herts**

19.9.1 High performing councils proactively manage media relations, rather than letting the media set the agenda.

19.9.2 To maximise positive publicity across all media, the Communications Team use a Public Relations (PR) forward plan with activity agreed a quarter ahead.

19.9.3 The Communications Team will promote:

- (a) Agreed service initiatives in liaison with the Leader of the Council, Chief Officers and Heads of Service.
- (b) Agreed service initiatives as requested by senior managers in liaison with the Leader of the Council and appropriate Executive Members.
- (c) The role of scrutiny within the overall democratic process, as the opportunity arises, in liaison with the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council.
- (d) Other activities and developments of the Council through news releases and publications, quoting Executive Members and partner organisations and/or service users, where their contributions add to the relevance and interest of the story.
- (e) Ceremonial and cross-organisational events in liaison with the Chairman of the Council.

## **19.10 Photography / video**

- 19.10.1 Photographs and videos are an excellent way to generate publicity, especially through the press and on social media. However, there are some important issues to consider, especially if children or young people are involved.
- 19.10.2 Where children are involved in media events at which film cameras and/or photographers are likely to be present, the lead Officer must obtain formal permission from the parent or guardian responsible for the child/young person. With older children (16 - 18 year olds) it is good practice to seek their permission directly as well as asking their parent or guardian. Consent forms are available from the Communications Team.

- 19.10.3 If it is not possible to gain consent due to the nature of the event being photographed, signs should be displayed for all attending the event informing them that photographs will be taken.

## **19.11 At Full Council and Executive Meetings**

- 19.11.1 Agendas will be published on the council's website ahead of the meeting.
- 19.11.2 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.
- 19.11.3 Motions and questions from individual Members shown on the agenda will not be publicised through press releases.
- 19.11.4 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.
- 19.11.5 Where a reporter wishes to find out what was said by individual Members during a debate, Officers will refer the reporter to the webcast of the meeting in the first instance, or the Member directly.

## **19.12 At Other Council Meetings**

- 19.12.1 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 Chief Executive and/or the Executive Member.
- 19.12.2 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.
- 19.12.3 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.

## **19.13 Political Communications**

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