

PRESS AND PR PROTOCOL FOR EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

1. The Legal Framework

1.1 Local government publicity is guided by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 (as amended) (“the Code”). The Code is statutory guidance and the Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions when making any decision on publicity.

1.2 In addition, the Council must comply with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1986 (“the Act”) regarding publicity. Section 2 of the Act contains prohibition on the publication by local authorities of material which in whole or part appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party and the Act also offers guidance for local authorities on the management of publicity which may contain or which may have links to party political material. Section 6 of the Act defines publicity as “any communication in any form, addressed to the public at large or a section of the public”. The Code therefore applies in relation to all decisions by local authorities relating to paid advertising and leaflet campaigns, publication of free newspapers and maintenance of websites – including hosting material created by third parties.

1.3 The Protocol reflects the guidance contained in the Code. Failure to follow the Protocol could lead to a breach of the Code and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Council’s reputation.

1.4 In addition, councillors are required, under the Council’s Constitution, to have regard to any Local Authority Code of Publicity made under the Local Government Act 1986 and therefore must have regard to this Protocol. Failure to do so could lead to a complaint that the councillor has breached the Member Code of Conduct in the Constitution.

1.5 The Principles of the Code are that publicity by local authorities should: (a) be lawful; (b) be cost effective; (c) be objective; (d) be even-handed; (e) be appropriate; (f) have regard to equality and diversity; and (g) be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

1.6 When deciding whether publicity may fall foul of the Act and the Code, the Council should consider:

- The content and style of the materials
- The timing and circumstances of the materials
- The likely effect on those to whom it is addressed
- Whether it advocates a particular view that can be easily identified with a political party; and
- If it is part of a campaign, the effect that the campaign is designed to achieve

If there is any doubt as to whether publicity has fallen foul of the Act and the Code, the Council’s Monitoring Officer/Deputy Monitoring Officer should be consulted for advice and guidance.

Introduction

2.1 The media should be viewed as an opportunity to help communicate the vision, work and decisions of the Council to local residents and beyond. To help achieve this, the Council has its own Communications Team. It is part of their role to develop positive relationships with the media on a day-to-day basis. This is supported by the Chief Executive and Management Team (MT). The Comms Team can be contacted via comms@eastcamb.gov.uk

2.2 One of the main principles of the Council's Communication Team is that we will be open and transparent. We will always endeavour to meet media deadlines. The Council will always comment on matters which are relevant to it, although there will be occasions when we are limited as to what we can say. This applies to things such as the financial affairs of individuals and when there are legal proceedings.

3.3 This media protocol outlines what is expected of both officers and councillors when dealing with the media. It also describes what the Council expects from the media.

3.0 Role of the Communications Team

3.1 The Communications Team will co-ordinate dealings between the media and the Council. Immediacy is the key to good media relations, so whether you are an officer of the Council, councillor or member of the media you should always be able to speak to a press officer during and outside normal hours.

3.2 The Communications Team will produce news stories which are current, factual and objective, and which highlight the services and priorities of the Council.

3.3 News releases and other publications produced by the Council should not include material designed to affect public support for a particular political party or group and therefore should avoid all mention of political parties or groups, except on occasions where their inclusion will assist understanding; or contain material which is disparaging of a particular political party or group or their individual members.

3.4 The Council has a role as a community leader, which means news stories may be issued to:

- Explain and raise awareness about evolving or existing Council policies, functions, projects or initiatives
- Provide information about services
- Open or launch a new scheme or project
- Publicise Council, committees and other meetings involving Council representatives, their agendas and outcomes
- Disseminate information about Council and committee recommendations to coincide with the information becoming public, i.e. through Council minutes or reports to Council or other meetings
- Encourage local community debate about - and involvement - in Council services and policies
- Inform the community that the Council has reacted promptly to a significant event

3.5 All press releases will be put on the website and sent to respective chairs and leaders on relevant committees

3.6 Party group views, decisions and communications are separate from the role of the Council's Communications Team and should be conveyed through news releases and publications resourced and issued by their own groups and be clearly endorsed with the name of the political group concerned. The Communications Team as a matter of courtesy requests copies of any press releases which a political party sends out.

4.0 Role of officers

4.1 Officers should always be alert to issues that could be of interest to the media and keep the Communications Team informed. This is particularly important for the launch of new initiatives

where members of the Communications Team will be able to advise on media-related matters. Officers should also endeavour to keep relevant councillors informed of media issues.

5.0 Dealing with the media

5.1 Proactive

5.1.1 The ability to act as quickly and decisively depends on the Communications Team being fully briefed and up to date. Members and officers should ensure issues, which will affect the Council's reputation, should be told in confidence to a member of the Communications Team.

5.1.2 The Council adopts a proactive approach and issues press releases on a regular basis. These are also posted on the Council's website (www.eastcambbs.gov.uk), shared with councillors and media contacts and, where relevant, posted onto social media channels.

5.1.3 Quotes will be attributed to officers on any specific operational issue which requires technical or in-depth knowledge to articulate. The Leader of Council and/or relevant committee Chairs will be quoted in all other press releases. Contact details for appropriate opposition spokesperson will be given in the footnotes to editors.

5.1.4 Officers and councillors are encouraged to liaise closely with the Communications Team to ensure that there is a regular flow of press releases sent to the media. The Communications Team will also maintain contact with all departments to give advice and help generate newsworthy stories.

5.1.5 Once a press release has been written, it will be forwarded to the officer/councillor responsible for approval. The press release will then be finally signed off by the Chief Executive or in his absence a member of the Management Team.

5.2 Reactive

5.2.1 The Council can expect to receive a wide range of requests from the media on a daily basis. This could include requests for press statements, radio and television interviews or to participate in a television documentary. All of these are co-ordinated by the Communications Team, which will liaise with appropriate officers/councillors, depending on the nature of the request.

5.2.2 It is important to meet media deadlines wherever possible and cooperation from officers/councillors is appreciated. The Council should respond to any media query with accuracy and as soon as the information is available. Realistic expectations should always be set.

5.2.3 Judgements will have to be made as to who within the Council responds to media requests. This will often involve discussions with officers at a senior level as well as councillors. Where an agreement cannot be reached, liaison will take place with the Chief Executive/Management Team.

6.0 What we expect from the media

6.1 The Council has already stated that it will be open and transparent with the media. We expect the same in return. This means that when the media approaches the Council, they present the full facts of the issue so that the Council can respond in the most appropriate way.

6.2 Permission should also be sought before the media take photographs or conduct recordings/interviews of Council business.

7.0 Media Training

7.1 In-house courses to help officers/councillors deal with the media are organised by the Communications Team. One to one training is also available on request or where the Communications Team believes it to be beneficial to the councillor or officer. As well as covering general background about how the media works, media training can help people to deal with radio/television interviews. Priority will be given to committee Chairs.

8.0 Elections

8.1 The period between the Notice of an Election and the election itself (Pre-election period) should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of 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.

8.2 However, 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. In an emergency and/or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the authority's control, the Chairman of Council should respond on behalf of the Council.

8.3 The regulations apply to officers of the Council and publicity which is issued in the name of the Council. Members of the Council are obviously free to issue their own political publicity under the usual electoral rules so long as there is no officer involvement or assistance and no Council facilities such as computers, printers, stationery, notice boards etc. are used.

8.4 During period between the Notice of Election and the elections themselves no Council officer may attribute quotes to any councillor in news releases other than in the exceptional circumstances set out in the code of practice. No Council officer may attribute views, proposals and recommendations to any particular member or group. No Council officer may issue publicity on any controversial issue unless it can be handled in a way that avoids a personal or party political dimension.

8.5 Publications and leaflets (other than election literature) addressed to the general public or a section of the public must observe the same restrictions.

9.0 Important Guidelines

9.1 Various local government Acts give councils powers to deal with publicity issues. The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity gives guidance on how these powers should be exercised.

The Code states clearly that the opinions of individual councillors should only be promoted when they are speaking on behalf of the Council as a whole. This means that the Comms Team can issue material on behalf of key "post holders" such as the Chairman, Leader or Deputy Leader but cannot act on behalf of "backbench" councillors or issues affecting councillors in their wards. There are also restrictions on publicity in the run up to an election as set out in paragraph 8.

9.2 The Council, through its publicity, is entitled to explain its policies and actions, but it is not permitted to campaign on political or other controversial issues with a view to persuading the public to a particular view. When commenting on policies or proposals of central government and other public bodies, the Council should present arguments fairly and in a balanced and objective manner.

9.3 In addition, councillors communicating with the media should not make references to officers which are personal in nature or could be construed as offensive. Any matters relating to individual performance by an officer should be raised through the appropriate mechanisms via the HR team or the officer's line manager and not in the media. Officers who are in communication with the media in the course of their employment should similarly refrain from any such references to councillors.