

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.

2. **Introduction**

- 2.1 The media should be viewed as an opportunity to help communicate and inform residents about what the Council does and how it spends its money. It is therefore vital that the Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible, will take a positive approach to meeting media requests for information.
- 2.2 To achieve this, the Council has a dedicated Communications team ("the Comms Team") to handle its press and PR. 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 Corporate Management Team (CMT). The Comms Team can be contacted via comms@eastcambs.gov.uk
- 2.3 One of the main principles of the Council's engagement with the media 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.
- 2.4 This 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. **The Role of the Comms Team**

- 3.1 The Comms 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 a media representative, you should be able to speak to a member of the Comms Team during and outside normal hours.
- 3.2 The Comms 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 or 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 the involvement in – Council services and policies; and
 - Inform the community that the Council has reacted promptly to a significant event.
- 3.5 All press releases will be put on the Council's website and sent to respective Chairs and Lead Officers on relevant committees.
- 3.6 Party group views, decisions and communications are separate from the role of the Council's Comms 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 Comms Team as a matter of courtesy would request copies of any release which a political party sends out.

4. Role of Officers

- 4.1 Officers should always be alert to issues that could be of interest to the media and keep the Comms Team informed. This is particularly important for the launch of new initiatives where the Comms Team will be able to advise on media related matters. Officers should also endeavour to keep relevant Councillors informed of media matters.

5. Dealing with the Media

5.1 Proactive

- 5.1.1 The ability to act as quickly and decisively depends on being fully up to date as a Comms Team. Councillors and officers should ensure issues which will affect the Council's reputation should be brought to the attention of the Comms Team in confidence as soon as possible.

- 5.1.2 The Council adopts a proactive approach and issues press releases on a daily basis. These are also posted on the Council's website (www.eastcambbs.gov.uk)
- 5.1.3 Quotes will be attributed to officers on any specific operational issues 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 the appropriate opposition spokesperson will be given in the footnotes to editors.
- 5.1.4 Officers and Councillors are encouraged to liaise closely with the Comms Team to ensure that there is a regular flow of press releases sent to the media. The Comms 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 Corporate 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 Comms Team, who 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 co-operation from officers/Councillors would be 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 A judgement will have to be made as to who within the Council responds to individual 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/Corporate Management Team.

6. **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. **Media Training**

- 7.1 In-house courses to help officers/Councillors deal with the media are organised on a regular basis by the Comms Team. As well as covering

general background about how the media works, the courses help people to deal with radio/television interviews. Priority will be given to Committee Chairmen.

8. Elections

- 8.1 The period between the Notice of an Election and the Election itself (“Purdah”) 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 Councillors or groups of Councillors.
- 8.2 However, it is acceptable for the Council to respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided that the answers are factual and not party political. In an emergency and/or where there is a genuine need for a Councillor level response to an important event outside the Council’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. Councillors 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, stationary, noticeboards, etc. are used.
- 8.4 During Purdah, no Council officer may attribute quotes to any Councillor in any 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 Councillor 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.
- 8.6 Further clarification or interpretation regarding Purdah can be obtained from the Returning Officer (the Chief Executive) or the Deputy Returning Officer (Director Commercial).

9. Important Guidelines

- 9.1 As set out above, various Local Government Acts give Councils power to deal with publicity issues and the Code 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.