

PRESS AND PR PROTOCOL FOR EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 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 established a partnership with the Communications team at Cambridgeshire County Council. 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)
- 1.2 One of the main principles of the Council's Corporate Communications Strategy 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.
- 1.3 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.

2.0 Role of the Press Office

- 2.1 The Press Office 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.
- 2.2 The Press Office will produce news stories which are current, factual and objective, and which highlight the services and priorities of the Council.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 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.

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

2.6 Party group views, decisions and communications are separate from the role of the Council's Press and Public Relations 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 Press Office as a matter of courtesy would request copies of any release which a political party sends out.

3.0 Role of departments

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

4.0 Dealing with the media

4.1 Proactive

4.1.1 The ability to act as quickly and decisively depends on being fully up to date as a Press Office. Members and officers should ensure issues, which will affect the Council's reputation, should be told in confidence to the Press Office.

4.1.2 The Council adopts a proactive approach and issues press releases on a daily basis. These are also posted on the Council's website (www.eastcamb.gov.uk).

- 4.1.3 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.
- 4.1.4 Officers and councillors are encouraged to liaise closely with the Press Office to ensure that there is a regular flow of press releases sent to the media. The Press office will also maintain contact with all departments to give advice and help generate newsworthy stories.
- 4.1.5 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.
- 4.2 Reactive
 - 4.2.1 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 Press Office who will liaise with appropriate officers/councillors, depending on the nature of the request.
 - 4.2.2 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.
 - 4.2.3 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.

5.0 What we expect from the media

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 Permission should also be sought before the media take photographs or conduct recordings/interviews of Council business.

6.0 Media Training

6.1 In-house courses to help officers/councillors deal with the media are organised on a regular basis by the Press Office. 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.

7.0 Elections

7.1 The period between the Notice of an Election and the Election itself 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.

7.2 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.

7.3 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.

7.4 During the 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.

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

8.0 Important Guidelines

8.1 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 Press Office can issue material on behalf of key 'postholders' such as the Chairman, portfolio holders and scrutiny chairs 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.

- 8.2 The Council, through their publicity, are entitled to explain their policies and actions, but they are 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 and proposals of central government and other public bodies, the Council should present arguments fairly and in a balanced and objective manner.
- 8.3 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 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.