

Principals and protocols for proactive communications with media and social media outlets

Background and Introduction

Cambridgeshire County Council is committed to effective communications so that citizens of the county are well informed about the services that affect their lives every day and how these services are organised, led and developed. The local media – both traditional and increasingly well followed social media platforms- play a valuable role in Cambridgeshire life as they have the ability to reach large numbers of local residents.

Cambridgeshire County Council's Communications and Information team aims to provide an efficient and timely response to media enquiries and raise the positive public profile of the authority by actively promoting accurate and balanced coverage of its work and activities

The proactive communications and marketing of the authority is led by the Head of Communications and Information, with two Senior Communications Managers leading on 'People' service and issues (CFA& Public Health) and two Senior Communications managers leading on 'Place' services and issues (ETE and Partnership & Communities issues)

To manage the demands of a 24 hour rolling news agenda Cambridgeshire County Council provides a 24/7 on call emergency communications response service

Key contacts for the Communications Team are

- Main team phone contact: 01223 699381
- Main email contact communications@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
- Out of Hours emergency contact number : 07833 480 348

The legal framework

The Unit operates within the terms and spirit of a legal framework set out in the Local Government Act of 1986, which states that:- "A local authority shall not publish any material which in whole, or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party".

The Act defines publicity as "any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public".

The Unit operates within the national Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity first published by the Government in August 1988

and revised in 2001 and 2011. The revised code states that publicity issued by local authorities should be lawful, cost effective, objective, even-handed, appropriate, have regard to equality and diversity and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

In the event of any potential conflict, the council's monitoring officer will be involved.

Principles

A number of fundamental principles underpin our work

No surprises/Members first. All Members quoted or named on a release - e.g. Leader/deputy leader of the council, committee chair, lead members, local member - will be sent news releases before they are sent to the media – so that they have time to digest and consider the issue prior to any media enquiry.

For the majority of news releases we aim to give named Members 12 – 24 hours notice of the issue of a release on which they are named, on the understanding that these are not shared in advance of publication time.

Where this is not possible, on urgent news items linked to serious issues, releases will still be sent to Members a minimum of 30mins before they are issued to the media, and the communications manager or advisor will telephone the relevant Member(s) to check receipt.

All other Members will be sent links to news releases as they are issued to the Media. Every attempt will be made to make sure Members should not hear critical council information first from other sources.

Members actively involved. The content of all principal news releases should be shared and developed in draft stages with the Leader and /or appropriate committee chair.

Staff informed. Media releases will be agreed with the principal officers and distributed to them prior to release. Staff should not learn of changes to their services or employment from the media, and so information about their work will be shared with them in advance of media issue. Our news releases will also be posted on the internet as soon as published.

Honest. The team will never knowingly mislead the media on a story or issue. Communications staff are in a long-term relationship with the local media in particular and they must trust our counsel and respect our honesty of approach.

Accessible and timely. Staff are firm, friendly but polite in dealings with the media, always ensure contact numbers are accurate and appropriate and return calls efficiently to recognise competing pressures on deadlines etc. The

timeliness of the response rate to media enquiries is recorded and a media officer is available to the media (and key departmental and political contacts) on a 24-hour basis, seven days a week.

Fair. The Unit does not routinely favour one media source over another. Where appropriate, staff will identify the relative importance of media sources and be able to clearly justify any strategy that promotes one over another. Where concerns are raised about the impartiality of a particular media source, these will be raised with the media outlet concerned initially, and if unresolved advice will be sought from the Chief Executive and monitoring officer.

Prompt and courteous rebuttal: Where there is a threat that inaccurate stories could damage the reputation of the Authority, the Communications team will challenge the story at source, rather than waiting for it to be published. If inaccurate and damaging stories are published, the team will contact the source concerned and seek redress

Our work with the media:

A) Answering media enquiries:

We will answer relevant media enquiries as soon as possible, especially as stories are now posted online quickly. If an issue does not involve the council, or the council has no comment to make, we will advise the reporter promptly. If the communications unit believes that a deadline is too tight, we will negotiate an extension if we can. We encourage Members and officers to respond to the communications unit as quickly as possible, as missing deadlines and being “unavailable for comment” can harm the council’s reputation.

b) Approach to aggressive enquiries:

The communications team will answer journalists’ enquiries courteously and will expect this to be reciprocated. However, if journalists are aggressive or rude, we reserve the right to politely end a phone conversation and request that the enquiry is made by email.

c) Use of FOIs:

We will encourage the media to submit enquiries, rather than FOIs and remind them that FOIs are answered within a formal timescale, which can be slower than submitting an enquiry through the usual communications route. All FOIs will be sent to the communications team’s leads for FOI enquiries, who will sense check proposed responses, especially those submitted by the media- preparing statements where necessary. We work with the FOI team and departments to reduce the number of FOI requests, by encouraging the proactive publication of key information to regular schedules.

D) Press releases:

We will email press releases to all relevant local, regional and national media contacts and will update our distribution list when we become aware of new outlets or journalists. We will also post releases online on the day of publication and, where appropriate Tweet links to them and post them on Facebook, if that is judged to be the best way to reach an audience.

e) Briefings:

We will always attempt to accommodate journalists' requests for briefings with key Members or officers, provided there are no issues around confidentiality or sensitivity. Briefings can add important context and detail to stories, helping to achieve a more balanced result for the council.

F) Council meetings:

The communications team will work closely with departments in the development of relevant committee papers, and even if this is not required departments will pass reports to main committees through the key comms contacts for information as early as possible to reduce the risk that there will be insufficient time to prepare proactive communications or context around sensitive information

The media and public are free to film, record or photograph council meetings, provided that they do not disrupt proceedings. We encourage broadcasters, as a courtesy, to inform the communications unit in advance of any meetings they intend to record or film, due to the size of their equipment, so that we can suggest which part of the room they can film from. CCC live tweets from Full Council and posts the coverage from its You Tube channel

g) Campaigns/Consultations.

The team will work with departments and council committees to develop an annual campaigns plan to market and promote the councils key objectives. It will also provide communications support to consultation and engagement related to major council projects. These activities will use market segmentation to reach the most appropriate audiences and be based on Citizen First: Digital first principles wherever possible.

3. Organisation

3a. It is proposed that information from CCC is organised in the following distinct ways:-

News releases – deal with substantial news matters that the council wants to promote, publicise or explain. They will often arise from items being raised or considered by Members, Member decisions, important visits, and matters of policy or a wide range of external matters. These will always carry contacts for political comment from all groups represented on committees in group size order

Public information notices – provide important, factual information about normal day-to-day activities of the council. They include matters such as road works and closures, minor emergencies – such as the temporary closure of offices, schools or other premises to which the public normally have access and basic event information. These will carry officer or communications contacts only

News statements –. Written statements are principally used in respect of sensitive issues to be sure that the council's position cannot be open to possible misinterpretation or misrepresentation. These will carry communications contacts only

Reactive comments - On reactive communications we still work on the principal of 'no surprises' but will also look to be proportionate– so if approached for comment on a significant issue affecting the council we will liaise with the most appropriate officer to develop the answer and seek comment or approval from the most appropriate councillor – usually the leader/deputy or most appropriate committee chair/vice chair.

Reactive statements will not usually be circulated to all Members, but where a written response is made linked to a significant issue or to council policy it will be sent to committee chairs/ political leads or local member(s) where appropriate.

If we are approached for comment on an ongoing issue where previous statements have been approved, or on a purely operation matter (dates, times, confirmation of issues, confirmation of responsibilities, follow up on proactive media releases or campaigns) we will not usually involve Members.

Our releases are targeted to the most relevant media outlets covering the geographical area or specialism, or channel most appropriate to the audience. The team will avoid issuing releases to all media outlets regardless of content as this form of blanket issue leads to loss of credibility.

3b Political quotes and named media contacts

Any quotes on matters relating to the development of County Council policies will always come from the appropriate Committee Chair or the Leader of the

Council as appropriate. This principle will also apply to any letters written for publication.

Where it is appropriate to include a quote in other news releases from the appropriate elected Member(s). This may be the Chairman/Chairwoman of the council on civic matters, or the Leader of the Council on matters which relate to his or her leadership role, but will most often be the Chair or vice chairman of the relevant committee with responsibility for the area concerned.

Where a news release specifically relates to an issue affecting a particular area or geographical division, the communications unit will advise the local Member (s) early, their contact details will be added to the release, beneath that of the political leads, and they will be sent the release prior to or simultaneously with distribution to the local media.

Where the release is non-controversial, and concerns a local issue that a local Member is particularly connected or involved with, they may be invited to include a quote in addition to, but not supersede, a quote from the committee chair.

All quotes should be cleared with the named person before use.

In the event of situations where an appropriate Member's quote is needed and the Member is unavailable for checking, the appropriate group Leader will be contacted for guidance. Officers will not normally approve Members' quotes except where a time constraint makes this inevitable in which case at least one member of SMT in addition to communications must approve the quote.

In all cases, the names and contact details for the lead members of all political groups on the committee will be included on our press releases, in order of group size.

The relevant departmental/officer contact will also be included, followed by that of the communications main number and out of hours contacts.

The Chairman/Chairwoman of the County Council (and in his/her absence, the Vice Chairman or Chairwoman) has an important part to play in ceremonial events carried out on behalf of the County Council. Their activities will be published and publicised as appropriate.

Officers will respond to media requests for interviews/information on matters involving the giving of background technical or practical operational information, non-policy matters, matters involving the implementation of policies or matters of professional responsibility.

Officers can be used as lead spokesmen or women when the County Council's reputation can be enhanced by use of a perceived 'expert'. E.g. the Director of Public Health talking about health issues.

In both cases above, approval will be sought from appropriate lead member

Social media:

A separate strategy and protocol governs the council's use of social media channels.

The council will use social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to promote its news, in addition to conventional media. The communications unit is responsible for the council's main channels and has the discretion to write and post material without clearance, provided it is in line with the social media protocol, based on an approved approach around a subject and the council's key messages.

We would remind staff and Members who use social media that reporters and the public could view their posts and use them in stories. We would encourage them (and provide training where necessary) to ensure that their social media activity could not be used to damage the reputation of the council.

Protocols

Issuing of agendas

All committee papers will be made available to the media a minimum of five working days before the meeting concerned and posted on the Internet by Democratic Services.

Media attendance at meetings

Members of the media must be provided with any additional papers which may have been issued on the day.

Motions and questions

Motions and questions from individual councillors shown on the agenda will not be publicised through County Council news releases in the interests of fairness.

Reporting debates

If a member of the media hasn't attended a meeting and wants to find out what was said during a debate, officers will direct them to the appropriate Committee Chair directly and offer to provide opposition contacts. Staff from the Communications Unit will report back to the media on any decision/recommendation reached.

Journalists are free to tweet or post from council meetings and members of the Communications Unit will only tweet factual decisions made by committees and Full Council depending on the newsworthiness of the issue being debated.

Live broadcasting from council meetings is permitted and the council itself live streams the full council meetings on its YouTube channel which the communications team will publicise.

Embargoes

Embargoes should be used sparingly. This would most typically be when a news release is linked to a launch event; when an issue of confidentiality requires it, or when a third party requires it (e.g. announcement of award or additional funding).

Embargoes are not legally enforceable and are adhered to by general local agreement.

Election purdah

The County Council follows the guidelines set out in the Code of Practice on Local Government publicity, “the period between the notice of election and the election itself, publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published by local authorities during this period unless expressly authorised by or under statute”.

No County Councillors will be quoted in any releases during the period outlined above.

Wider publicity initiatives also need to be considered carefully during this period. The Code states that: local authorities should not publish any publicity on controversial issues or report views or proposals in such a way that that identifies them with any members or groups of members.

Any prospective candidates (parliamentary, county and district) requesting visits to County Council premises must always be treated equally. County Council staff should not be included in any photographs that candidates might arrange, to avoid any impression of one party being favoured over another. County council offices should not be used to host political events during this time, unless these premises are available for general hire

Further guidance to officers and members is available from the document on Election Guidance agreed with Chief Officers and Group Leaders before the May 2017 elections.

Letters for Publication

The Communications team will, in consultation with appropriate service director or Committee Chair consider reply to letters and articles about the Council or its services that appear in the press and help draw up letters for publication, if appropriate. In such cases, the Committee Chair concerned will sign the letter or agree who else is best to respond

Group Leaders will consider and deal with any response to letters or comments which are clearly political in nature and, while the Communications

team may flag these to the relevant group, they will not be involved in the drawing up or issuing of any response.

Our staff Code of Conduct states that all contact with the media should be conducted through, or in consultation with, the Communications Team. If an employee wishes to write to a newspaper where they can be identified as a Council employee, they must first obtain permission from their senior manager or Head of Service.

Dealing with Confidential Items

Under the Local Government Act 2007 a written record of all key decisions and other executive decisions made by the council must be made publicly available 'as soon as practicable' after the meeting, even if the decision has been taken as an exempt item). This could be when the minutes of the meeting are available, but could equally be much sooner after the decision has been taken.

The Communications Team will always seek to give the outcome of an issue taken 'below the line' – unless there are over-riding reasons not to do so, such as the handling of personal and sensitive issues affecting staff or clients, or financial and commercial issues.

In these circumstances, officers should liaise with the department concerned before deciding the best course of action to follow.

Emergency Communications

Cambridgeshire County Council has a statutory duty under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to warn and inform local people in emergency situations to help minimise risk and harm.

The Communications team is a member of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Warn and Inform Communications subgroup

In emergency circumstances, the normal media approvals process may not apply. The Communications Team Leader will approve media activity in consultation with the Chief Executive or relevant 'gold; or 'silver; command

Media/Social Media Training

In an organisation comprising 61 elected Members and 5000 FTE employees it would be impossible and impractical for all communications to be produced and issued by the communications team

And while all high profile and sensitive communications or those most closely supporting the council's objectives, will be led and developed by the team - part of its role will be supporting elected Members and staff of Cambridgeshire

County Council who have responsibility to be good communicators as part of their role.

The Communications and Information Team will provide training to councillors and staff which encourages a positive relationship in communicating with their communities and with the media and provides information on the best ways to get their information across.

Communication on Partnership issues or Projects

Partnership working is an increasingly common feature of our activities

Communications protocols must be established with contractors at the outset of major contracts and this will be the responsibility of the lead department/officer involved in the contract, but should be overseen by the Communications dept.

The protocols (template available) will set out responsibilities for which organisation takes the communications lead, frequency and type of communications, sign off and key spokespeople.

The template will, ensure that:-

- Cambridgeshire County Council's role or contribution is identified appropriately and information to media or local residents includes quotes from named County Council Members or Officers.
- The Cambridgeshire County Council logo is included with others on any documentation
- The text of information is shared in draft stages between partners and approved by the relevant communications leads prior to distribution.
- The method, manner and timing of distribution are also agreed in advance by the relevant communications leads.
- Depending on the size of the project or partnership the relevant County Council Committee Chair will be consulted as usual but may not be quoted where it is agreed that the County Council is not the lead agency and in the interests of producing succinct media releases.
- Wherever possible, news releases should be issued on joint paper, with contact details for each organisation.

Greater Cambridge Partnership (City Deal)

Where the Greater Cambridgeshire Partnership is concerned, agreed communication protocols are already in place, agreed by the Partnership

Board on which all partners are represented. The key elements are as follows:-

- *Pro-active communications will, as far as possible, be planned and devised in consultation with the relevant partner agency/ies, via the subject experts (usually an officer) or, in the event of unavailability, through the communications lead.*
- *Requests for information and/or comments to members/officers will clearly state deadline for response.*
- *Pro-active and re-active statements will, as far as possible, be seen and approved by the GCP Chair/Vice-Chair who will act as talking heads.*

Inevitably, to maximise an opportunity or to avoid a communications vacuum, there will be occasions when a statement or response needs to be issued dynamically or swiftly to deadline. It is recognised that, on such occasions, the GCP Programme Director, Communications Manager and/or partners' communications leads will have authority to speak on behalf of the GCCD, in good faith, and adhering to the communications principles set out in their strategy, ensuring the Chair/Vice-Chair and relevant officers are kept informed.

On occasion, it will be relevant for the lead agency to issue a communication which is linked to the GCP programme. In this event, the agency should liaise with the GCP Communications Manager/Programme Director prior to publication.

Combined Authority

An agreed communications protocol will be developed with the Combined Authority.

Communications Support for Schools

Practical support for schools is offered in times of particular difficulties or success. This is a traded service and the support can be in the form of general advice and guidance, media releases, supporting with letters to parents, fielding media calls, media briefings/news conferences.

In general terms:-

The content of all media releases or statements will be cleared in advance with the Head teacher and, if possible, the Chair of Governors.

Any media release will make it clear it is being issued on behalf of the school concerned and headed with the name of the school governing body as appropriate.

Relevant school contact names and numbers will be included on any release except where prior agreement has been reached that communications team staff should field all calls in the first instance.

The Member and director with responsibility for Education will be kept fully informed on media issues affecting schools in line with the 'no surprises' principle.

Where schools are not buying into the traded service, communications support will still be offered – at an agreed hourly rate.