

PRINCIPLES AND PROTOCOLS FOR PROACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS WITH MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA OUTLETS

To: **Constitution and Ethics Committee**

Meeting Date: **26 September 2017**

From: **Head of Communications and Information**

Purpose: **To adopt the principles and protocols for proactive communications with media and social media outlets.**

Recommendation: **The Constitution and Ethics Committee is asked to recommend to Council the approach and principles contained within the updated and revised media protocol for Cambridgeshire County Council for inclusion in the Council's Constitution.**

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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 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 (People and Communities & Public Health) and two Senior Communications managers leading on 'Place' (ETE and Communities and Partnerships Committee).
- 1.4 To manage the demands of a 24 hour rolling news agenda, Cambridgeshire County Council provides a 24/7 on call emergency communications response service.
- 1.5 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".
- 1.6 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.
- 1.7 In the event of any potential conflict, the Council's monitoring officer will be involved.

2. MAIN ISSUES

- 2.1 **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.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 Where this is not possible, on urgent news items linked to serious issues, releases will still be sent to Members a minimum of 30 minutes before they are issued, and the communications officer will phone the relevant Member(s) to check receipt.

- 2.4 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.
- 2.5 **Members actively involved.** The content of all principal news releases will be shared and developed in draft with the Leader and/or appropriate Committee Chairman/woman.
- 2.6 **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.
- 2.7 **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.
- 2.8 **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.
- 2.9 **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.
- 2.10 **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.

3. **ORGANISATION – Organising Our Approach to Communication**

- 3.1 It is proposed that information from CCC is organised in the following distinct ways:-
- 3.2 **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.
- 3.3 **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.

- 3.4 **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.
- 3.5 **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.
- 3.6 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.
- 3.7 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.
- 3.8 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.

Political Quotes and Named Media Contacts

- 3.9 Any quotes on matters relating to the development of County Council policies will always come from the appropriate Committee Chairman/woman or the Leader of the Council as appropriate. This principle will also apply to any letters written for publication.
- 3.10 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/woman of the relevant committee with responsibility for the area concerned.
- 3.11 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.
- 3.12 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.
- 3.13 All quotes should be cleared with the named person before use.
- 3.14 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.

- 3.15 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.
- 3.16 The relevant departmental/officer contact will also be included, followed by that of the communications main number and out of hours' contacts.
- 3.17 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.
- 3.18 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.
- 3.19 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.
- 3.20 In both cases above, approval will be sought from appropriate lead member.

Social Media and the News

- 3.21 A separate strategy and protocol governs the council's use of social media channels.
- 3.22 The council will use social media platforms, 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.
- 3.23 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.

Source Documents	Location
Media Protocol	Appended to report