

# **PART 7 – THE CODES, PROTOCOLS AND ADVICE**

## **K - Communications Protocol**

## **Communications Protocol and Principles**

### **1. Introduction and Objectives**

The aim of this protocol is to ensure that the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead (“the Council”) makes the best use of its communications resources to support open, accessible, and responsive communications, whilst acknowledging that council resources may not be used for party political purposes.

It clearly sets out the respective roles of all Councillors and officers in dealing with the media.

Adherence to the protocol will ensure consistency of standards, accuracy of information and appropriate political and officer input with a view to protecting and enhancing the reputation of the Council.

The aim of the protocol is to ensure that the council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner.

In all cases, the council’s approach to the media should be:

- open and honest
- proactive
- responsive
- timely

The ability to act as quickly and decisively depends on being fully up to date as a communications team. Councillors and officers should ensure issues which will affect the council’s reputation should be brought to the attention of the communications team in confidence as soon as possible.

If there is any doubt over, or challenge to, the interpretation or application of this code, the matter will be referred to the Monitoring Officer for a decision. Where agreement about communications content cannot be reached, the Monitoring Officer will decide.

### **2. Scope**

The Protocol applies to any the Council’s communication, including:

- Press releases and statements to the media
- Digital content including web copy, visual/ audio content and social media
- Any communication or document prepared by the Council services for public consumption, including advertising, leaflets, newsletters, reports, posters, banners, flyers or websites
- Any document or publicity with which the Council is associated with.
- Even if the publication is produced in partnership or is a joint document then the communications protocols and brand guidelines still apply

- Any publication or work prepared for the public domain, by consultants or contractors when working on behalf of the Council.
- Internal communications to staff and partners.

Protocols apply to everyone who works for the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead in any capacity, or who represent the organisation in some way, including:

- All Councillors
- All employees within the organisation, including those employed on an agency, freelance or consultant basis
- Volunteers working with council service teams
- Partners, providers and suppliers (including contracted or commissioned services) that may want to refer to the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead Council in publicity material

### **3. Communications at the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead**

The Council is committed to effective communication with its residents, councillors, stakeholders and interested parties.

Providing a professional information service to the media is a key responsibility for the council and we take a proactive approach to working with the media wherever possible.

The communications team will provide the Chief Executive, senior managers, and councillors with advice on communications issues, which relate to the reputation of the council and its policies and services.

Effective communication is every member of staff's responsibility. Officers will keep the communications team informed about plans and items that could generate media interest or require other types of communication with sufficient advance notice to maximise opportunities.

The Council communicates in a variety of ways and uses a range of online and offline methods. These include social media, press releases, email newsletters, the website, posters and publications and advertising, as appropriate. The communications protocol applies to all of these communication types.

Our protocol explains the council's approach to managing external communications, the media, working procedures and the role of officers and councillors involved in this process.

Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. There should be no party-political terms, political slogans or direct attacks on policies and opinions of other parties, groups, or individuals.

The council must comply with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1986 ("the Act") regarding publicity. All media relations work will comply with the national Code of Practice for Local Government Publicity. The Code is statutory guidance and the

Council required by legislation to consider the Code in coming to any decision on publicity.

#### **4. Legal Framework**

All press releases and media engagement on behalf of the council will:

- (a) be issued or organised through the council's communications team;
- (b) be approved in accordance with section 8 of the Protocol
- (c) be concerned only with matters of policy and/or which relate to the council's functions as a whole; and
- (d) not contain anything of a political nature.

In this respect regard must be given to the relevant legislation concerning publicity issued by local authorities, especially around election time, as summarised below.

Any policy related comments will normally be made by the Leader, in his /her absence the Deputy Leader or, where appropriate, the relevant Cabinet Member.

Under Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986 it places a prohibition upon the council that it:

*"shall not publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to effect support for a political party. In determining whether material falls within the prohibition regard shall be had to the content and style of the material, the time and other circumstances of publication and the likely effect on those to whom it is directed and in particular the following matters:*

*(a) Whether the material refers to a political party or to persons identified with a political party or promotes or opposes a point of view on a question of political controversy which is identifiable as the view of one political party and not of another;*

*(b) Where material is part of a campaign the effect which the campaign appears to be designed to achieve"*

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

Local authorities are also required by section 4(1) of the Act to have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contents of in coming to any decision on publicity.

#### **5. The Publicity Code**

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity was last issued in 2011 can be found on the website of the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

The Publicity Code is grouped into seven principles for local authorities to follow, that the council's publicity should:

- **be lawful**
- **be cost-effective**
- **be objective**
- **be even-handed**
- **be appropriate**
- **have regard to equality and diversity**
- **be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.**

The Publicity Code gives recommended practice on a number of aspects of publicity covering subject matter, costs, content, dissemination, advertising, recruitment advertising, publicity about individual members of an authority, timing of publicity, elections, referendums and petitions, and assistance to others for publicity. The principles may be summarised as follows:

The principle of lawfulness is that an authority's publicity should comply with statutory provisions and advises that any paid-for advertising published by a local authority should comply with the Advertising Standards Authority's Advertising Codes.

The principle of cost-effectiveness is that local authorities should be able to confirm that consideration has been given to the value for money that the publicity is achieving, while recognising that in some circumstances this will be difficult to quantify.

The principle of objectivity requires local authority publicity to be politically impartial.

The Publicity Code acknowledges that a council has to be able to explain its decisions and justify its policies, but this should not be done in a way that can be perceived as a political statement or a commentary on contentious areas of public policy.

The principle of even-handedness has the effect that local authority publicity can address matters of political controversy in a fair manner and may contain links to other political sites or contain political logos on material hosted for third parties. But local authorities should ensure that publicity about the council does not seek to affect support for a single councillor or group. The Publicity Code does, however, recognise that at times it is acceptable to associate publicity with a single member of the council.

The principle addressing the appropriate use of publicity is that local authorities should refrain from retaining the services of lobbyists, i.e. political professionals whose job it is to bring their client's message to those in a position to influence policy.

Appropriate use of publicity is also about the frequency, content, and appearance of council newsletters in order to prevent unfair competition with local newspapers. It sets out that generally the frequency of council newsletters should be no more than quarterly.

The equality and diversity principle is that publicity by local authorities may seek to influence positively the attitudes of local people in relation to matters of health, safety, and other issues where publicity can have a positive influence on the behaviour of the public.

Finally, the principle that local authority publicity should be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity gives guidance as to how local authority publicity should be treated during period of elections and referendums, both national and local.

## **6. Media Relations**

The Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead values the media as one of its key partners in communication and aims to forge strong professional links with local, regional, and national media.

The council is committed to being transparent and maintaining a positive working relationship with media. We respect the right of the media to report on any given topic.

Providing a professional information service to the media is a key responsibility for the council. The council takes a proactive approach to working with the media wherever possible.

The way in which the council is portrayed in the media has a major influence on how it is perceived, and every opportunity should be taken to publicise the council's services, decisions, policies, and initiatives.

All councillors and officers should support the communications team in responding to media enquiries in a timescale that meets journalists' deadlines. If the council fails to reply in time, the journalist may source their story elsewhere or record a 'no comment' response, which may not be in the council's interests.

The communications team will never knowingly mislead the media on a story. In order to maintain a good long-term relationship, the department needs to be trusted by the media and the wider community.

## **7. Press release content**

All media enquiries should be referred to the communications team in the first instance and the identified communications point of contact. This enables the service to make a judgement about how an enquiry should be answered and by whom. The response can often be handled with a written statement.

The vast majority of council publicity will include a written quote or interview, which can help to make the content more interesting and provide an authoritative voice on the subject matter. In certain cases, where a press release or statement is simply to provide a brief announcement or notice, this may not be necessary

### **Spokespersons**

One of the most important aspects of dealing with and managing media is being able to provide a prompt response to a query, question, or interview request. The sooner we can respond and involve ourselves in the story, the greater the chance we have

to influence it. This is especially important where the council's reputation might be affected.

We will also work to influence the news agenda proactively by offering people for interview or providing case studies to illustrate topical issues. We will use our forward planning process to identify opportunities in advance but may still want/have to exploit on-the-day stories particularly when there is breaking news or developing stories.

It is important that quotes are attributed to an individual as this demonstrates responsibility and counters perceptions that the council is a faceless and unaccountable organisation.

The Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Members will act as spokespersons for the council in responding to the press and media and making public statements on behalf of the council. The Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Members should liaise with the communications team on all forms of contact with the press and media.

Where a matter has significant implications for policy or the reputation of the council, the Leader of the Council will be contacted.

The Leader of Council and/or Cabinet Members will be quoted in all other press releases.

Where the appropriate responsible Councillor is unavailable within media deadlines, and therefore unable to approve comment that would otherwise be attributable to him/her, the Leader of the Council will be quoted or an alternative suitable responsible councillor.

In the event of neither the Leader or the Cabinet Member being available, an appropriate responsible officer will approve the quote, which will be attributed to a 'council spokesperson'. Whilst this is not best practice from a public transparency or accountability perspective, it does serve to reinforce the clearly defined roles of councillors and officers in the decision-making process.

Quotes will be attributed to officers on any specific operational issues which requires technical or in-depth knowledge to articulate. Officers will be quoted in circumstances where a member of the public would reasonably expect an operational, officer perspective. Communications officers will advise with recommendations.

Quotes, comments, and statements will reflect the factual representation of the council's or committee's decisions, and not that of the individual and/or political party views.

These situations will be such as when:

- where it is likely that a press deadline would be missed resulting in a lack of response from the council;

- there is a need to respond extremely quickly in changing circumstances to maintain the flow of information to the public (e.g. an emergency road closure or an environmental health investigation);
- specific technical information is being explained
- there is a legal aspect to the comment which would benefit from attribution to a professional officer rather than a politician.

## **8. Press release and statement production**

The communications team will guide and be guided by the Chief Executive, Executive Directors, Assistant Director / Heads of Service, Leader, or Cabinet Member on whether to issue a press release.

Heads of Service should request their teams to draft a press release which includes key information that they want to share including what they want people to do with the information (key message and call to action) and how it fits with strategic objectives and priorities and overall council plan. The communications team should be given five working days' notice before it needs issuing to ensure there is enough time to fully prepare the release and gain approval.

It is recognised that some press releases are needed due to emerging announcements and they would be issued as soon as is practicable.

Press releases can be issued prior to Cabinet or Full Council meetings to inform the media of factual information regarding a specific meeting, for example when the report is published to the council website. They can also be issued as soon as feasible following a decision made at Cabinet/Council noting that there may be a call-in process.

Press releases must have contact details to inform the media how they gain further information.

It is essential that the Councillor and/or officer lets the communications team know if they are not going to be available at the time of the issuing of the press release.

Press releases will be issued to all Councillors at the same time as the media.

Media releases which are embargoed will be sent to all Councillors at the time that the embargo is lifted.

Press releases will be added to the council's website for a period of one year and will then be removed.

### **Press release approval process**

If quotes are included within press releases, they can only be on behalf of the council from Cabinet Members or the Mayor/Deputy Mayor and their responsibility will be included.

The content of such quotes will be cleared in advance with the Councillors concerned and they are only approving their comments and not the body of the press release.

Approval of the body of the press release is the responsibility of the relevant Assistant Director and Executive Director.

This template will be added to all press releases to show the approval process

	<b>Embargo:</b> Yes (date) / no	<b>Approval:</b> Operational officer(s)	<b>Assistant Director</b>	<b>Executive Director</b>	<b>Cabinet Member</b>	<b>Legal/Other</b>
	No	e.g. Kirsty Hunt	e.g. Elaine Browne	e.g. Elizabeth Griffiths	e.g. Cllr Bermange	e.g. Elaine Browne
<b>Media to issue to:</b>	General press list Local Trade press					

### **Press releases/press statements – officers’ role**

Heads of Service are encouraged to think about their own service and how they can achieve effective publicity and to proactively promote good news stories within their team. This relates to possible stories that can be used in press releases, features, radio interviews and photo-calls. All press release and press statements should be issued through the corporate communications team. On some occasions press releases may be issued via other channels but the corporate communications team needs to be aware of the release

Officers can carry out media interviews and be quoted in press statements in a number of circumstances.

- The Cabinet Member has agreed that they are the subject matter expert and an operational viewpoint is needed.
- The media outlet requests operational detail.
- Elections have been called and we are within the pre-election period which restricts interview from political parties.

### **9. Media releases and publicity**

The communications team is available to provide general advice to all Councillors on media relations. However, it cannot provide practical support to Councillors on media relations in respect of views which do not reflect council policies, or which affect public support for a political party or the promotion of individual Councillors.

## **10. Party Political Press Releases**

Party and political 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, would appreciate copies of any release which a political group sends out.

## **11. Factual press enquiries**

Some media enquiries require simple factual responses, for example clarifying a very straightforward point on a release which has been issued. In such cases, the communications team will deal directly with the query, taking the advice of an officer when appropriate. Sometimes an officer may speak direct to the media (in liaison with the communications team) to answer a purely factual query or a written response could be issued. These queries will not routinely be reported to Councillors.

## **12. Social media**

The communications team monitor and run the corporate Facebook and Twitter accounts for the council.

The accounts will post content relating to corporate comms campaign as well as updates and information that our followers could find of interest.

The accounts may also share posts from all councillors if it is relevant, interesting, and useful to our followers.

There are other accounts that are run within the council. They include, Visit Windsor, Libraries, Museum and My Royal Borough.

They have been created for a specific purpose to share information about their service or function.

All accounts can like content from other accounts as well as retweet from other accounts if appropriate.

## **13. Media/photo-call events**

Invitations to media/photo-call events which are organised by the communications team will always include:

- Leader
- The relevant Cabinet Member (s)

The communications team will liaise with the relevant Cabinet Member(s) when setting up these events.

Photos taken by the council's communications team should not be used by councillors in political releases or newsletters as they are the property of the Council.

#### **14. Mayoral press releases**

The mayor is the borough's civic head and is involved in several civic functions each year including the mayor's civic reception and the Remembrance services.

The civic team co-ordinates the mayor's diary and alerts the communications team to events that may need press releases.

The quotes in the press releases will be approved by the mayor.

#### **15. Letters issued to the press**

If Cabinet Members/Councillors wish to send letters to the media, the communications team will not produce these or draft them other than to provide factual information.

In certain circumstance, when it is considered the best strategic option, the communications team may draft a letter as it is the most appropriate response to reputational risk.

#### **16. Use of the council crest/logo**

The crest and logo are intellectual property belonging to the council and should not be used in any communications other than those specifically approved by the council, through the Communications Team, for release.

#### **17. Elections**

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 councillors or groups of councillors.

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.

Councillors holding key political positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a councillor level response to an important event outside the authority's control.

Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve councillors likely to be standing for election.

### **18. Major incidents**

In the event of a major incident, emergency or break in business continuity, the communications team will liaise with the emergency planning team regarding the release of information to the media and the public.

This may involve liaison with other agencies including Thames Valley Police, South Central Ambulance service and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service.

In these situations, statements will be signed off by the most appropriate person – gold or silver representative or a Head of Service/Director.

### **19. Correcting Inaccurate Reporting**

Should the media publish/broadcast an inaccuracy relating to council business, policy or process, a quick decision will be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

The issue will be discussed with the appropriate Cabinet Member and Executive Director/Assistant Director/ Head of Service and a plan of action agreed.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain. Each case must be judged individually.