

Protocol on Media Relations

1. Introduction

1.1 This Protocol has been drawn up to supplement the principles in the national Code for Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2001 and subsequent amendments, and the Council's own Communications Policy.

1.2 The Code of Practice aims to help local government communicate effectively and impartially so that legitimate political debate is not stifled. It states: "*The main purposes of local authority publicity are to increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs; to allow local people to have a real and informed say about issues that affect them; to explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities; and in general to improve local accountability.*"

1.3 Local accountability requires local understanding. This is promoted by local authorities explaining their objectives and policies to their electors and council tax payers. In recent years authorities have increasingly used publicity to keep the public informed, and to encourage greater participation. Local authorities also need to tell the public about their services, and the cost and value of them. Local authorities see the task of making the public aware of their available services as an essential part of service provision. Good, effective publicity, aimed at improving public awareness of a council's activities, is to be welcomed.

2.0 General principles

2.1 The Council's communications will be open and honest in dealing with the media.

2.2 Media releases will report the decisions and outcomes of the Council's activities, and explain the reasons for them. They will not report on political debates within the Council. They will not be used to comment on national political debates unless of specific relevance to this Council.

2.3 The process for preparing and publishing a media release is as outlined in Appendix 1.

2.4 All media releases issued by the Council will include a quote from the Leader or appropriate Cabinet Member, unless it is of an operational nature or a specific legal matter. Where the issue is of a particular local importance, it may include a quote supporting the Council's message from the local Member. If the media release is the result of a successful motion at Full Council, it will include a quote from the proposer and seconder of the successful motion. When a motion has been proposed but failed at Full Council, the text of the motion and contact details of its proposer and seconder will be communicated to the local media, but only the content of an approved motion will be the subject of a Council media

release. If the media release is in response to the business of a committee, it should include a quote from the Committee Chairman and the appropriate Cabinet Member. The Chairman of the Council will be the spokesman on all matters of a civic or ceremonial nature. The relevant Member(s) will also be involved in the drafting of the content of the release, unless it is of an operational or specific legal matter.

2.5 The contact details of the relevant Cabinet Member, and any other Member quoted in the media release, will be given at the end of the release. Where Members are quoted in a media release, they will be expected to provide follow up interviews with accredited media when required, unless advised otherwise by the Leader and Chief Executive in the wider interest of the Council and its responsibilities. The Council's communications staff will be available to provide any guidance required. In the interests of ensuring that Wealden's position is heard, Members should endeavour to respond to calls from the media on the same day or within a requested deadline. All appropriate Members will given TV and radio training during their first year in office.

2.6 The communications staff will assist Members to communicate with their wards to ensure they are able to fulfill their role as community leaders. Communications staff will not be able to assist Members with any communication of a political nature. In cases where this may be unclear, the matter will be referred to the Head of Policy & Review.

2.7 Individual Members will not normally be permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Council or its subsidiary structures (e.g. Scrutiny Committees, etc). News releases issued in the name of the Council must reflect the Council's stated policy and not the views of individual Members or groups of Members. Media releases cannot be party political.

2.8 Political parties may issue their own media releases to help encourage greater public participation in the political process. These should not name individual members of staff or allude to recognised posts. Communications staff ask that a copy of any such media releases be sent to the Council in advance of publication.

2.9 In the restricted period before an election, commonly known as *purdah*, media releases will not include quotes from any Members who are involved in the election. Members holding key political or civic positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a Member-level response to an important event outside the authority's control. Proactive events arranged for this period should not involve Members likely to be standing for election. Where necessary, specific additional guidance may be provided by officers.

3.0 The role of Officers and Staff

3.1 Officers and staff should politely refer any direct approach from the media to the communications staff who will discuss a suitable response with appropriate officers and Members. They should not attempt to answer enquiries directly unless authorised. The Council's Communication officer can be contacted by phone 01892 602745, or email jim.vandenbos@wealden.gov.uk.

3.2 Only Corporate Directors, Service Heads, and designated specialist staff; including the Communications Officer, may deal directly with media requests for information and interviews.

3.3 All staff must inform the communications staff in advance of any event or committee item which could be expected to cause significant media interest.

3.4 Officers and staff should contact the communications staff with suggestions for media releases. Communications staff will discuss and prepare with the release with relevant parties.

3.5 In matters of operational importance, and during any election period; a Director, Head of Service or a designated specialist officer will provide the quote for a media release and provide interviews for the media on request. If a politician visits the Council during an election period, staff should not be included in any arranged photographs.

4.0 Working with Partners

4.1 The Council seeks the best value for its council tax payers by working in partnership with other authorities and organisations. It is important that the public and stakeholders are aware of the Council's involvement and responsibilities in any partnership activities. Wealden District Council should be clearly branded alongside its partners in any joint media activities including launches, publications and media releases.

4.2 The Council will support its partners by sourcing and providing quotes from appropriate Members. It will also work with its partners to secure the best media coverage for partnerships.

4.3 Any media protocol drawn up by a partnership involving this Council should, be in keeping with this protocol.

4.4 Where the number of quotes in a partnership media release compromises the likely success of the media release, the Council will support moves to streamline the process so that only principal partners are quoted.

4.5 Media releases involving partners will be sent to their communications representatives on publication. They will also be sent to parish and town clerks where appropriate.

4.6 In the event of an election, it is possible that prospective candidates (Parliamentary & European) may request visits to see Council services. All candidates must be treated equally and where possible, such requests should be allowed.

5.0 Public Meetings

5.1 A designated press area will be provided for accredited members of the media at all public meetings organised by the Council.

5.2 Applications for filming at public meetings of the Council will be considered by the chairman of the relevant committee, the Head of Democratic & Legal Services and the Head of Policy & Review. If filming at public meetings is allowed, the camera should remain in one position throughout the meeting. There should be no flash photography or excessive movement that might disrupt the meeting. The chairman of the meeting has the power to veto or curtail filming at any time if he or she believes there is a risk of it distorting the democratic process of the meeting.

6.0 The role of Communications Staff

6.1 A communications representative will be reasonably available outside normal office hours for urgent matters. This will be via Lifeline, telephone 01323 644422, in the first instance. At all times, calls will be returned in line with the Customer Charter for Policy & Communications. Communications staff will try to meet media deadlines whenever possible. This may involve prioritising responses when resources are limited.

6.2 Media releases and comments in response to the policies and proposals of central government and other public bodies should follow the general rule that they are *"objective, balanced, informative and accurate"*. They should not be *"a prejudiced, unreasoning or political attack on the policies or proposals in question or on those putting them forward."*

6.3 The Council will always give a response to media enquiries. If an appropriate Member or responsible officer is unable to respond to a media interview request, the Communications Officer will provide a response in keeping with the Council's protocol.

6.4 On occasions when the Council is involved in events of national or significant local media attention, the Chief Executive and Leader will arrange to bring

together appropriate Members, lead officers and the Communication Officer, to meet regularly, monitor the situation and respond as required. A specific communication plan will be agreed. If needed, outside communications advice, support and guidance shall be obtained. During such occasions, the communications staff will keep Members, Corporate Directors and Service Heads informed of significant developments daily, or as the situation requires.