

COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

Scope of the protocol

1. This protocol applies to all publicity issued or produced and paid for out of the council's resources.
2. The protocol also applies to any other material issued by organisations that are either wholly or partly separate from the council but which use council's grants or other funding from the council to produce the publicity.

The legal framework

3. When publishing any material at any time, a local authority must comply with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1986 (the act) and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 (the code) which was revised on 31 March 2011. Section 2 of the act states as follows:
 - (1) A local authority shall not publish (or assist others to publish) any material, which in whole or in part is designed to affect public support for a political party
 - (2) 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 the 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 views of one political party and not of another
 - b) where the material is part of a campaign, the effect that the campaign appears to be designed to achieve.
4. Section 6 of the act defines publicity as "any communication in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public".
5. The key points to note from the above section and the code are that publicity by local authorities should:
 - (1) be lawful
 - (2) be cost-effective
 - Consideration needs to be given to achieving value for money and to what is the most appropriate publicity in each case.
 - The code requires that where central government publicity has been issued on a matter, local authorities should not incur expenditure on publicity on the same matter unless they consider additional value is added, i.e. by giving a local context to national issues.
 - Local authorities should consider whether to take advice before embarking on a publicity campaign involving very large expenditure.

- (3) be objective
 - Where publicity is used to comment on, or respond to the policies and proposals of central government, or other local councils, the comments or response should be balanced and factually accurate and should avoid anything likely to be perceived by readers as constituting a political statement.
 - Any publicity describing council policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanations or both.
 - Local authorities should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.

- (4) be even-handed
 - Where local authority publicity addresses matters of political controversy it should seek to present the different positions in question in a fair manner.
 - Except where a period of heightened sensitivity exists (i.e. purdah), it is acceptable for local authorities to publicise the work done by individual members of the council, even if those views do not reflect the views of the local authority itself, although such publicity should make this fact clear.
 - It is acceptable for local authorities to host publicity prepared by third parties such as blogs and with links to external sites, although those may need to be disabled during a period of heightened sensitivity.
 - It is acceptable for publicity prepared by third parties and hosted by local authorities to include a logo associated with a political party or particular member of the authority such as the leader, but publicity material relating to a particular member must not seek to affect public support for that individual.

- (5) be appropriate
 - Local authorities should not incur any expenditure in retaining the services of lobbyists in order to publish material designed to influence public officials, MPs or the government.
 - Publicity about local authorities and services should be freely available in accessible formats.
 - Local authority publicity should clearly identify itself as a product of the local authority.

- (6) have regard to equality and diversity
 - Publicity may seek to influence attitudes on health, safety, crime prevention, equality, diversity and community issues.

- (7) be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity
 - Particularly regard needs to be paid before elections and referendums, when the general rule is that no publicity should be issued which seeks to influence voters.

- (8) When deciding whether publicity may fall foul of the act and the code, the council should consider
 - the content and style of the materials
 - the timing and circumstances of the materials
 - the likely effect on those to whom it is addressed

- whether it refers to a political party or politician
- whether it advocates a particular view that can be easily identified with a political party
- if it is part of a campaign, the effect that campaign is designed to achieve.

Publicity of individual councillors

6. Publicity about councillors may include their contact details, their political affiliation, the position they hold with the council and their responsibilities.
7. Publicity may include information about individual councillor's proposals, decisions and recommendations where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council. Publicity of individual councillors should avoid personalisation of issues or personal image making.

Ward member of the council

8. Ward councillors will be invited to attend public meetings and events organised by the council to consider a local issue and will also be kept informed of consultative exercises on local issues. Some events will involve some members in formal roles, i.e. take part in photo opportunities, make presentations or officially address an audience and members will be advised of what those formal roles are and who is involved in those at the time of invitation.
9. Nothing in this protocol shall prevent the normal publication of the details of members' surgeries on-line, in hard copy or in advertisements.

Official visits by government and shadow ministers

10. It is open to government and shadow ministers to visit the borough at any time. However should the minister require assistance or access to any of the council's services or facilities, the visit will need to be arranged through official channels of the council. This will ensure that appropriate support is provided on the day.
11. To this end all such requests from government and shadow ministers must be referred to the head of communications who will promptly notify the chief executive of the request.
12. The head of communications will liaise with their counterpart at the relevant government department to ascertain the purpose of the visit. The head of communications in consultation with the chief executive and monitoring officer will authorise the visit if satisfied that the visit would assist the council in promoting one or more of its policies and or objectives or would be purely for fact finding.
13. Events which involve government ministers or other political figures and shadow ministers should usually be led by the leader or cabinet member with the Mayor informed or invited to lead as appropriate. Ward councillors and leaders of all the political parties should be invited where possible and appropriate.

Visits by local and other Members of Parliament (MPs)

14. There may be instances where local and other MPs who are not ministers will have a special interest in attending an event that is taking place in the borough. In this instance the MP in question may either be formally invited or merely informed about the event. Where the MP has not been specifically invited to attend, he or she should not expect to be treated as an "official" invitee.

Promotional publicity

15. Local authorities are authorised under the Local Government Act 1972 to publicise information as to the services provided by them or other local authorities in their area. Publicity can also be used to explain or justify the council's policies either in general, such as in the annual report, or on specific topics, for example as a background to consultation. However, any such publicity should comply with the principles of the code.

Publicity of matters going before the cabinet, council assembly or any committee of the council

16. All matters going before the cabinet or committees for decision are publicised five clear working days before the meeting or seven clear working days in the case of council assembly unless the report contains exempt information (i.e. information that has been judged by the proper officer as confidential). Some matters will obviously generate more press interest than others. Where the press is interested in a matter that is to be the subject of a decision by the council, the head of communications in conjunction with the relevant chief officer and cabinet member may issue a press release explaining the reasons behind the recommendations. Any such press release must be factual and objective. Members may be asked by the media to comment on this press release but should remember that whilst criticism of ideas and opinion is part of the democratic process, a member must comply with the code of conduct.
17. Where there has been misinformation about any of the council's policies or objectives the head of communications is authorised to take any appropriate corrective measures.

Scrutiny

18. Publicity about scrutiny will concentrate on factual information about which scrutiny exercises the council is conducting, who is involved, the process they will follow and the decisions they take. Where scrutiny suggests a course of action that differs to or challenges one agreed by the cabinet or any other council decision making body, this would be made clear in publicity together with the process for resolving the difference.

Contact with press

19. As outlined in the code of conduct for employees, employees and other staff should not communicate with press and other media unless authorised by the appropriate manager to do so.

Press releases

20. All press releases from the council must be agreed and signed off by the communications unit and issued either electronically or on council headed paper. Press releases containing quotes from members must be agreed and signed off by the appropriate member.

Social media

21. It is acceptable for the council to host social media, such as a blog, which itself contains links to external sites where the content would not itself comply with the code. However care needs to be exercised in that such links do not:
 - contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
 - be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
 - be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner.
22. However particular care must be taken during the period before elections and referendums to ensure that no breach of any legal restriction takes place. It may be necessary to suspend the hosting of material produced by third parties or public forums during such periods.
23. In addition, where members are present as voting members at any meeting where they are determining any application for any approval, consent, licence, permit or permission, they should not access the internet, send or receive emails, texts, messages or tweets concerning the business of that committee.
24. ~~The code states that councillors and Candidates in an election or referendum should not be provided with any form of publicity during the period between the notice of an election and the election itself.~~
25. ~~Councillors in key positions should only comment on behalf of the council in an emergency.~~
26. Any publicity should be objective, factual, not deal with controversial political issues and avoid personalisation of the issues or inappropriate personal image making.
27. ~~Any publicity about events or services must be factual and not party political.~~
28. ~~Any publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in such a way that it identifies them with individual councillors or groups of councillors or political parties.~~
29. The council should not produce publicity designed to influence the views of local people on petitions, referendums or specific proposals.
30. ~~Councillors, MPs and Candidates in the election may attend the public parts of council premises, even if they intend to use it as a photo opportunity, so long as any such attendance is not organised or funded from council resources and council equipment and employees are not involved.~~

The role of the communications unit

31. The communications unit works on behalf of the council and not for any political party. The purpose of its work is to provide high quality information about the council, its policies and its services and to maintain public confidence and where appropriate to protect and to promote the council's reputation. It aims to encourage better relationships with the local community. It is important to remember that all publicity and press releases are directed through the communications unit so these goals can be achieved.
32. The head of communications can advise members on how to deal with press enquiries, and how to arrange publicity for events, which can be properly publicised. Members have a remit to discover and make public inefficiency and poor public service; however, they should be careful where a matter they wish to make public relates to identifiable officers.
33. Publicity and information will cover areas such as why the council makes the decisions it does, and why other proposals are rejected. The communications unit will feature the decisions of the council, i.e. those decisions made by the council assembly, cabinet, scrutiny, planning or licensing committees or community councils, or those actions which have been taken within the broad policy framework already set by the council, subject to any call-in arrangements.

Obligations on officers in relation to documents being prepared for public consumption

34. Council staff and resources must not be used to arrange proactive events, such as photocalls, if they would provide politicians with a platform to communicate with the public that would not otherwise be available to them.
35. When considering whether a communication or publicity is safe to be put out officers should ask themselves whether the communication or publicity is objective, balanced, informative and accurate. If the answer is an unequivocal yes then the communication or publicity is safe to be put out.
36. Where officers are uncertain as to whether a communication or publicity is appropriate they should seek advice from the communications unit and the monitoring officer in those cases.
37. If something cannot go out as a member has suggested then officers can explain why and offer an alternative form of words. Again the communications unit or the monitoring officer can offer you guidance on what would be appropriate.

The role of the Mayor

38. The Mayor is the first citizen of the borough and as such is apolitical. He or she is responsible for promoting the council as a whole and representing the council in civic and ceremonial events.
39. The Mayor is also responsible for chairing meetings of the council assembly and interpreting the constitution as necessary. Where the Mayor is unable to act or the office is vacant, the Deputy Mayor will discharge all of the Mayor's

duties except that the deputy may not chair meetings of the council assembly unless specifically appointed to do so.

Key spokespeople

40. The role of the spokesperson is to present facts about council decisions, the context in which they were taken, actions, and issues faced by the council. Members who are key council spokespeople are the leader and deputy leader and cabinet members within their portfolio, the chair of overview and scrutiny committee, planning chair, licensing chair, chair of the relevant community council, standards chair and chair of the audit and governance committee. They will be quoted or featured in publicity where it relates to their responsibilities on the council.

Correspondence

41. Generally correspondence from one member should not be copied to, or discussed with, another member without the member's consent subject to any rights of access arising from the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998. If a member has sought advice from an officer and included a circulation list, it can be assumed that the officer's response can be circulated to those people on the circulation list for the original letter, even if that list includes other members.
42. This does not prevent officers copying letters to each other about casework across ward or interest boundaries in order to respond to a member inquiry. Points of general interest to all members may be converted into general advice, and circulated (within the limitations set down in the Data Protection Act). A chief officer is also able to advise a relevant cabinet member in general terms of an issue raised with the chief officer in correspondence, or otherwise, by another member.
43. Official letters from the council should normally be sent out in the name of the appropriate officer rather than a member. It may be appropriate for members to write in certain circumstances (e.g. representations to a government minister); however, this would be the exception rather than the norm. Letters which create obligations or give instructions should not be sent out in the name of a member.

Postage

44. Preparation and postage of correspondence are a significant part of the support given to members. The content and purpose of letters, leaflets, and other correspondence must relate to the member's role in the authority. The members' services manager will arrange for monitoring arrangements to be put in place, and refer doubtful cases to the monitoring officer.
45. The use of council resources in the preparation and postage of the following kinds of post are not permitted:
 - private mail including correspondence for other bodies
 - mailshots
 - letters sending out information (concerning planning application, refuse collection, etc) which is the responsibility of officers

- letters which criticise other groups and their members or praise the writer or their political group
- group publicity such as political party greetings cards.

For the avoidance of doubt, correspondence to residents about the location of surgeries by members who do not have a fixed location for their surgery shall not constitute a mailshot.

46. The question of what is a mailshot has proved problematic. Members are entitled to use council resources to respond to requests that their constituents have raised with them for action and explain what action has been taken, but not generally to publicise their work in the ward. Requests to send out large numbers of letters will have to show what demand is being responded to, and that the letter is a proportionate response to that demand. In any event, member services do not have the resources to send out more than one batch of such letters a month for any member. Members are reminded that this is a finite resource, and member services may need to limit the use of this if excessive costs are incurred.
47. Where members are uncertain as to whether a communication or publicity is appropriate they should seek advice from the head of communications and the monitoring officer in those cases.

Emails

48. Email and internet access facilities are provided to members to support work on council related activities. The standards set out for officers in the use of emails apply equally to members. The key standards are that:
 - any behaviour or comment that is not permitted in the spoken or paper environment is also not permitted in an email message
 - email messages should be inoffensive and should not be construed to harass
 - emails must not incite racial hatred or be pornographic in nature either in the body of the text or as an attachment
 - chain emails should not be forwarded on.
49. As a general rule, emails cannot be used for party political purposes but:
 - emails organising the political group in relation to council business are allowed
 - the use of the email address in a party political leaflet to advertise a ward surgery or as a means of allowing residents to contact their ward members on non-party political matters is allowed
 - emails to newspapers as a means of commenting on council business from the political group's perspective are allowed.
50. Members should note the requirements for social media are given in paragraphs 21 and 22.
51. Members should remember that emails may be subject to disclosure if a request is made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

52. Any use of IT resources, including email and the internet, that contravenes any legislation (such as the Data Protection Act 1998; the Computer Misuse Act 1990; and the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (amended 2002)); or breaches the general obligations of the code of conduct for members; or breaches council policies on information security is considered to be unacceptable. Members are responsible for the content of any email sent from your username and in certain circumstances the council may also be found liable for the content of such email.
53. Emails and other personal information should be retained only for the minimum period necessary, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Further details on the Data Protection Act in term of members' business use can be obtained from legal services.
54. It is important that members manage the information that they store to ensure its availability, confidentiality and integrity. Therefore members should regularly review all council information (including files and email messages) they hold and delete all redundant or irrelevant data.
55. Where a telephone number has been issued to a member or group of members it is expected that this number will be publicised except on political publicity material.