

Corporate Policy Committee

Date of Meeting:	9 th February 2023
Report Title:	Media Relations Protocol
Report of:	Jane Burns, Executive Director – Corporate Services
Report Reference No:	CP/34/22-23
Ward(s) Affected:	All wards

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report presents an updated media relations protocol for Cheshire East Council.
- 1.2. The protocol supports the Corporate Plan priority of promoting and developing the services of the council through regular communications and engagement with all residents.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. A media relations protocol sets out the policy and principles that define how public and media relations activity for an organisation will be undertaken. It sets out roles and responsibilities regarding the council's public relations and specifically media relations activity. This includes establishing the approvals process, identifying spokespersons and the distribution/publication protocol.
- 2.2. The previous version of the protocol was approved on 8 June 2021. A revised protocol is being brought to this committee following a scheduled review.
- 2.3. **Revisions to the protocol are:**
 - 2.3.1. Further clarification provided with regard to the definition of 'journalistic media'

- 2.3.2. Updated vision and strategic outcomes for communications activity, following adoption of the Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25
- 2.3.3. Increased clarity over spokesperson roles for champions, mayor and ward members.
- 2.3.4. A revised process for the approval process of straightforward operational factual statements and information bulletins.
- 2.3.5. A revised process for the approval of media activity in exceptional circumstances, when responding to urgent circumstances.
- 2.3.6. Increased clarity on the distribution and publication of targeted media releases or statements that have a specific audience in mind.
- 2.3.7. Style and formatting improvements

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Corporate Policy Committee is asked to approve the updated protocol.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1. We want residents to be aware of the council and the services we provide. We will produce regular, proactive communications through a range of channels. The media relations protocol will enable efficient and responsible public communications activity. It will ensure that the organisation's public communications are approved by those officers and members with appropriate authority. It will also make it clear which individual officers and members are empowered to speak on behalf of the organisation.
- 4.2. The updated protocol reflects learning from the first full year of working with the committee system of decision-making and the ever-changing media landscape.
- 4.3. The council attracts a significant amount of interest from the media, and press, broadcast and online media outlets provide important channels in delivery of the council's communications strategy. It is important that we have effective processes and protocol in place to manage this interest and activity.
- 4.4. Activity in 2021/22 included:
 - 741 media enquiries
 - 287 media releases
 - 6,600 individual media articles and news stories

5. Other Options Considered

5.1.

Option	Impact	Risk
The council could operate without a media relations protocol.	This would mean that the organisation had no framework to coordinate, govern and manage public communication activity.	This would hamper the ability of the organisation to communicate effectively with residents, customers and stakeholders. It would also put the organisation at increased risk of reputational damage.
The council could continue to use the previous version of the media relations protocol.	This would not reflect learning from the first full year of working with the committee system of decision-making and the ever-changing media landscape.	This would hamper the ability of the organisation to communicate effectively with residents, customers and stakeholders. It would also put the organisation at increased risk of reputational damage.

6. Background

- 6.1. Cheshire East Council is an important organisation with a significant impact and influence locally and regionally. Its policies and service delivery have wide-ranging, direct and indirect impact on people's lives and futures.
- 6.2. It is important that our customers and other stakeholders have good access to information about the organisation.
- 6.3. It is also important that the policies and priorities of the organisation, and the reasons and drivers for those policies and priorities, are presented in ways that can be easily understood by the full range of stakeholders.
- 6.4. The media relations protocol is a framework that establishes the rules and conventions to ensure that the council's public communications activity is well managed and well governed.
- 6.5. The use of a media relations protocol by Cheshire East Council, to effectively manage approvals, distribution and publication of the organisation's public statements and media activity, is well-established. The previous version of protocol was approved in June 2021 by Corporate Policy Committee.

7. Consultation and Engagement

- 7.1. Subject to the committee's views, the updated protocol will be shared with all members.

8. Implications

8.1. Legal

- 8.1.1. The communications and engagement activities covered by this report and strategy are subject to the following guidance and legislation:
- 8.1.2. Data Protection Act 2018
- 8.1.3. Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988
- 8.1.4. Libel and defamation law
- 8.1.5. Code of recommended practice for local government publicity
- 8.1.6. Civil Contingency Act (2004)

8.2. Finance

- 8.2.1. The media relations protocol has been written in the context of agreed 2022/23 budget for communications and media activity.

8.3. Policy

- 8.3.1. The media relations protocol is a key document that establishes how the council's media communications will be managed and governed.

8.4. Equality

- 8.4.1. The council has a duty under the Equality Act (2010) and the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Government Publicity to ensure that information about council services is made available to all audiences.
- 8.4.2. The code of recommended practice states that: "Publicity about local authorities and the services they provide should be freely available to anyone who wishes to receive such information in a format readily accessible and understandable by the person making the request or by any particular group for which services are provided."
- 8.4.3. While the media relations protocol does not in itself dictate the channels, format or means of communication, it does support communications activity of all kinds, for all audiences, including those with protected characteristics, by setting out a framework to

ensure that any public communications activity is approved and voiced by individuals with the appropriate authority.

8.5. Human Resources

8.5.1. This report has no direct impact on human resources.

8.5.2. The protocol shapes the way in which the communications and media team operates. Any significant variation in the volume and/or nature of the work required resulting from a change of protocol, would require a review of resourcing.

8.6. Risk Management

8.6.1. An effective media relations protocol will support the organisation to ensure that it is fairly represented, that it is transparently and clearly accountable and accredited for its decisions and actions. The protocol will reduce the risk of reputational damage through misrepresentation, misinformation and/or disinformation.

8.7. Rural Communities

8.7.1. The media relations protocol is a necessary tool to ensure that the council's public communications are well managed and are available across a range of channels, reaching individuals and communities in all geographies across Cheshire East, including rural areas.

8.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

8.8.1. Communications and media activity will be central to the council's work to deliver the ambitions of the council's children and families services. The media relations protocol is a necessary tool to ensure that the council's communications resources are well managed.

8.9. Public Health

8.9.1. Communications and media activity will be central to the council's work to deliver the ambitions of the council's Public Health service. The media relations protocol is a necessary tool to ensure that the council's communications resources are well managed.

8.10. Climate Change

8.10.1. Communications and media activity will be central to the council's work to address the climate change emergency and deliver the ambitions of the council's environmental strategy. The media relations protocol is a necessary tool to ensure that the council's communications resources are well managed.

Access to Information

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Appendices:	Appendix 1: CEC Media relations protocol 2023
Background Papers:	Code of recommended practice on local government publicity.