

Cheshire East Council

Media relations protocol 2023

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Introduction

This media relations protocol will enable efficient and responsible public communications activity, ensuring that the organisation's public communications are approved by those officers and members with appropriate authority and that it is clear which individual officers and members are empowered to speak on behalf of the organisation.

The council has committed to promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents. It will also ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision making.

This document sets out the policy and principles that define how public and media relations activity for Cheshire East Council (CEC), as a local authority, will be undertaken.

This protocol is based on the principles set out in the [Code of recommended practice on local government publicity](#). The code asserts that council 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.

A fundamental principle underlying the code is that publicly funded council communications activity should be apolitical, representing the views and position of the local authority as a public service organisation, not the views of a given political party, group or individual.

The organisation, individual officers and members, may risk criticism and/or prosecution for misuse of public funds should communications activity be seen to be politically motivated. This is subject to particular scrutiny in periods of heightened sensitivity, such as immediately before elections or referenda.

This protocol sets out:

- The purpose and scope of the communications function
- The principles and process through which the requirement for communications activity is generated
- How we will ensure consistency and quality of messages
- How we identify spokespersons to speak on behalf of the council
- The approval process for public statements.

The guidance and processes detailed in this protocol should be considered alongside other rules, guidance and training that apply to how officers and members operate. As an example, specific considerations apply to members of planning committees when speaking about decisions of the local planning authority.

The protocol is principally concerned with the way the organisation engages with journalistic media, in the context of the continued shift to online/ digital publishing. This includes, but is not limited to, journalistic activity in the following media:

- Online news sites
- Social media
- Online video and audio
- Newspapers
- Magazines



- Radio
- TV

In the following geographies:

- Hyper-local
- Local
- Regional
- National
- International

‘Journalistic Media’ is defined by the professional standards adhered to by the practitioner. A professional journalist, for the purposes of this protocol, will be accredited by one or more of the following bodies:

- National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ)
- Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC)

They will hold either:

- National press card, issued by the UK Press Card Authority, or
- International press card issued by the Chartered Institute of Journalists

Their work will be published, broadcast or distributed in media described above, and is subject to regulation by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and the IPSO [Editors’ Code of Practice](#) or [IMPRESS](#).

The communications and media service will require proof of accreditation prior to engaging with individuals and organisations as journalistic media under this protocol. Individuals and organisations that do not qualify as journalistic media under this definition will be dealt with under the council’s other public / customer / stakeholder engagement protocols as appropriate.

Communications and media service purpose

The communications and media service is a supportive enabling function, offering professional, strategic communications advice and outcome-based, audience-focussed communications activity to help achieve corporate objectives.

It will:

- Provide professional communications resources, guidance and governance to support the effective delivery of council services and initiatives
- Work to influence perceptions and encourage positive action, internally and externally, locally and nationally, to position CEC as a high-performing local authority
- Support and enable culture change and a shift in behaviours through the delivery of high-quality evidence-based resources and messaging.

The service has the following vision and strategic outcomes for communications with residents:

- Vision: People in Cheshire East are well-informed about their council and council services. They are aware of council decisions and how to influence them.
- Strategic outcomes:
 - Residents know about council services and how to access them, and what they can do to help themselves



- Residents understand the council's policies and priorities, how it makes decisions and how they can influence those decisions
- Residents understand the council's role in supporting the local economy
- Residents understand the council's role in supporting local people, including more vulnerable members of our community

Scope of activity for the communications and media service

The communications and media service will:

- Work with the organisation to identify and plan for communications priorities, opportunities and risks
- Deliver information about council services and how to access them, prioritising those services where evidence shows that these are the most important to residents, and those which are council priorities
- Lead, enable and support public and stakeholder communications and media activity required to deliver priority projects and programmes
- Communicate, publicise and promote decisions, service changes, and priorities etc, that are the result of decisions taken through the public, transparent and democratic decision-making processes of the authority, following appropriate consultation. For example:
 - Decisions taken at full council
 - Decisions taken at service committees
 - Decisions otherwise delegated through any powers as established through the constitution
- Defend the reputation of the organisation (but not that of individual members personally), rebutting and correcting factual inaccuracies, where appropriate, where they enter the public conversation about the organisation
- Undertake all communications and media activity ensuring that engagement with all impacted stakeholders and audiences is coordinated, owned and managed in each instance of communications activity
- Support council's corporate plan and strategic priorities.

***Note:** The communications and media team will work on matters that relate to the activity, decisions and priorities of the council as an organisation and will not operate in any way that is party-political in nature. To do so would be in direct breach of the [Code of recommended practice on local government publicity](#)

In public relations, as in all council business, it is the role of officers to create content that is neutral, or occasionally to speak neutrally, on behalf of the whole council (albeit including the delivery of the administration's programme).

Any clearly party-political communications must be through members' own channels (for example their own party newsletters and their own social media channels) rather than those owned and supported by officers and funded by taxpayer resources.



Demand for communications activity

The need for communications activity will generally be identified by the communications and media service with senior officers of the council (Head of Service, Director, Executive Director and/or Chief Executive) and will be agreed with the relevant committee Chair or Leader and Deputy Leader as appropriate.

All media enquiries, media releases, statements, information bulletins, pitches and interview requests relating to the council, its policies and services must be handled by the communications and media service, following this protocol.

Any other officer contacted by a journalist requesting an interview or comment should refer the journalist to the communications and media service. In such cases, the officer should take care not to make any comment on council policy – this could be misunderstood as representing the council's organisational position.

Media activity regarding formal decisions

Meeting agendas are published five clear working days in advance. On occasions this may mean that journalists seek to write news articles, based on committee reports, in advance of decisions being taken.

Where journalists' media stories are written and published in advance of decisions being taken, the communications and media service will monitor to ensure accuracy, and, where necessary, will draft a corrective /clarifying response.

On occasion, it may be appropriate for the service to produce proactive content in advance of decisions, setting out the facts regarding a decision to enable public understanding. However, in such cases, great care will be taken so that the story does not appear to predetermine a decision nor seek to influence that decision.

Proactive

Proactive opportunities may be identified for one or more of the following reasons:

- To provide information about access to services
- To inform audiences and stakeholders about any change to service or policy
- To celebrate the organisation's successes
- To establish the organisation's position on an issue (but not that of an individual member or political group)
- To promote the organisation's profile, sharing innovation and good practice
- To encourage positive behaviour change in line with council priorities.

Reactive

The organisation may be required to respond to externally generated demand. Such demands may arise from one or more of the following:

- Journalist enquiry
- Response to misinformation or dis-information in the public domain
- Any emerging issue, situation, emergency or crisis
- To establish the organisation's position on an emerging issue (but not that of an individual member or political group).

Where a journalist makes a media enquiry, it is likely that they will give a deadline. If they do not, the communications and media officer should ask in order to manage expectations.



The IPSO [Editors' Code of Practice](#) establishes an expectation of 'right of reply'. This means that where a story is written about the council, the council must be given the opportunity to put forward its position. Right of reply can be exercised through a response to a media enquiry, in a media interview with a council spokesperson or, in some cases, a journalist's factual record of a meeting, for example a meeting of full council, may be considered as having given sufficient right of reply to the organisation.

Consistency and quality of message

The council is a large and complex organisation, operating in a complicated environment; an environment which sometimes has many conflicting voices. It is important that the organisation's public messages are as transparent, simple and consistent as possible, delivered with clarity despite these complexities. This means that messages to the general public should be coordinated through the communications and media service, with all appropriate approvals in place prior to publication.

Spokespersons

A spokesperson is the named individual who is quoted in a media release or statement, and/or is put up for press, online, radio or TV interview.

It is essential that, where speaking on behalf of the organisation as a whole, spokespersons have the authority to speak on behalf of the organisation and are well-informed with regard to the facts and the council's position on the matter in question.

It is also essential that spokespersons are available to respond quickly to provide and/or approve content and quotes. This is to ensure that the council's communications can be issued in a timely manner.

Service committee chair

The default spokesperson for any media release, response, statement or interview is the chair of the relevant service committee (or their nominee) or, in their absence, the vice-chair. They have responsibility for the policy and strategic direction in relation to the work of the particular service committee.

Leader and Deputy Leader of the council

The Council Leader or Deputy Leader will be put forward for interview where there are significant issues that affect the council or borough as a whole or that cut across several committees. Where the Leader or Deputy Leader is not available, they may nominate a senior officer, such as the Chief Executive, to take their place.

Statutory and regulatory non-executive committee chairs

Where the subject matter has specifically to do with the work of a particular statutory or regulatory non-executive committee of the council, for example, scrutiny, licensing, audit and governance etc, then the chair of that committee may be quoted. This would be in agreement with, and in addition to, the service committee chair responsible for the policy relating to that area of the council's work.



Mayor and member champions

The mayor and the council's member champions may also be quoted where the communication relates to their specific area of civic or champion responsibility. This will be with the agreement of the chair of the relevant service committee or, in their absence, the vice-chair, and when the views expressed support the council's policy and decisions.

Ward members

Where a story is particularly relevant to a specific ward or, on advice from the relevant officer(s) or committee chair, is deemed to be the result of direct work by ward member(s) in that ward, ward members may be quoted. This will be in agreement with, and in addition to, the chair of the relevant service committee responsible for that area of the council's work, or, in their absence, the vice-chair.

Where a story is particularly relevant to a number of wards, for example, an entire town, ward members in that town may, with the agreement of the service committee chair (or in their absence the vice-chair), nominate a ward councillor spokesperson.

Senior manager

In some cases, for example where a statement is concerned with a purely operational matter, such as a staffing matter, it may, with the agreement of the committee chair, or in their absence, vice-chair and chief executive, be suitable for an appropriate senior officer to be named spokesperson.

'A council spokesperson'

In exceptional circumstances, for example, when working under particular time pressures and the default spokespersons are for whatever reason unavailable, quotes in media releases / statements may be attributed to 'a council spokesperson'. This can only apply where the council's position on an issue is clearly established.

This should only be used in exceptional circumstances. It is important that, wherever possible, quotes are attributed to a named, identifiable and accountable individual.

Approval process

It is essential that all public statements and releases are approved by officers and members of the council with appropriate authority, in a timely fashion. Where possible, we aim to respond within one working day.

Media releases and statements

Will be signed off by:

- Communications and media service
- Head of Service
- Director and/or Executive Director
- Chair of the relevant committee, or in their absence, or at their request, vice-chair of that committee—and any other named spokesperson

Where the matters concerned are over-arching, or are deemed of sufficient importance or impact, approval may also be sought from Chief Executive, Leader and Deputy Leader, prior to distribution.



Where a matter is purely operational, such as a staffing matter, and an officer or 'council spokesperson' is quoted, releases and statements may be shared with the chair/vice-chair for information only, rather than approval.

If there is a significant reputation risk to the council not responding at short notice, in exceptional circumstances, the communications service will seek sign off at the highest available level, having contacted each management tier, down to Head of Service – highlighting the risks if we do not respond. In such cases, quotes / statements would be attributed to 'council spokesperson'.

Simple operational statements and information bulletins:

To enable efficient handling of media enquiries and content, simple operational statements¹ and information bulletins may be signed off by:

- Communications and media service
- Head of Service

However, if the Head of Service deems there to be sensitivities or any concerns, they will escalate to their director and/or executive director for consideration and to determine level of approval required.

¹ Simple operational statements and information bulletins are defined as those conveying straightforward facts on subjects that are deemed as non-controversial and which do not seek to express or explain policy position.

Distribution and Publication

Media releases and information bulletins

Many of the council's media releases and information bulletins will be intended for a general, local, public audience. In these cases, the distribution of releases will be as follows:

1. Internal stakeholders, including all elected members
2. Publication on website
3. Social media channels as appropriate
4. Direct email to local media distribution list.

On other occasions, media releases may have a particular audience in mind. In such cases, the distribution of releases will be as follows:

1. Internal stakeholders, including all elected members
2. Publication on website
3. OPTIONAL - Social media – this may be targeted to a specific audience
4. OPTIONAL - Direct email to relevant external stakeholders / partners
5. OPTIONAL - Direct email to specialist/targeted media distribution list
6. OPTIONAL - Direct email to local media distribution list

Media statements (reactive)

Media statements are used in response to specific media enquiries and therefore are not normally for general distribution/publication. Distribution of statements will be as follows:

1. Internal stakeholders, including members of the relevant committee
2. Direct email to enquiring journalist(s).



In exceptional circumstances, the decision may be taken to publish a specific media statement on the Cheshire East Council website and/or shared on social media. However, this would only be the case where there was a requirement to correct significant misinformation/disinformation or misunderstanding and the statement gave sufficient context to make sense in its own right. In many cases, due to the responsive nature of a statement, statements do not, in their own right, give sufficient context to be published for general, universal consumption without additional information.

Contact details

Email: media@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Telephone: 01270 686577

Web: www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/media

