

Media Relations Protocol



Protocol objectives

The function of an effective media relations team and this protocol is to provide information to journalistic media, in various formats, to promote the work and policies of the council, enhancing and protecting its reputation and strengthening the council's brand.

More specifically the protocol's objectives are:

- To clarify responsibilities and roles;
- To ensure consistency of council messages to external and internal audiences;
- To provide media guidance to officers and elected members;
- To promote the strategic direction of the council and support cabinet priorities;
- To highlight the necessity for information sharing between service areas, cabinet members and other relevant partner organisations prior to briefing media relations officers on requirements;
- To establish a clear and effective sign-off process on all media communications including, press releases, statements, media invites and information bulletins;
- To gather and update appropriate and preferred contact information from cabinet members and senior officers for signing off media relations output;
- To highlight the importance of named deputies for when officers and councillors are on leave, ill, or out of the office and not contactable;
- To highlight the need to respond to media queries in a timely manner – often within the same day to meet modern and changing digital multi-media deadlines.



Directing all media enquiries

Media enquiries can come into any part of the council. However, enquiries should *always* be passed directly to the media relations team to manage. Any journalist contacting officers directly should be redirected accordingly. Media enquiries should not be directed to email addresses of individual officers within the team – the following generic email and phone number should always be used:

Email: media@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Telephone: 01270 686577

All Cabinet members, heads of service, directors and executive directors will need to be contacted by the media relations team, at some time, about media queries – often at very short notice and sometimes out of normal office hours.

It is imperative, therefore, that these individuals' preferred method of contact, ability to read documents such as draft press releases, and their designated deputies are known to the media relations team. It is essential that the names of deputies are provided to ensure periods of holiday, sickness and absence do not delay response times to the media.

It is the responsibility of senior service managers to ensure they provide this information to the Media Relations team. A 24/7 media relations service is available using the above phone number and this follows the same protocol for speed of response and sign-off, detailed below.



One Council – One Reputation: Collective responsibility for speed of response and sign-off



ENQUIRY

The communications officer takes the enquiry from the media, logs it on the information management system (Vuelio) and advises the relevant head of service (cc'ing director / executive director) that a statement, interview or pro-active/reactive media release needs to be supplied and the time deadline for response.

All media queries are assessed by a media relations officer (MRO) and their reputational implications assessed for seriousness and urgency in discussion with the senior media relations officer (SMRO) or corporate manager communications and media (CMCM). In exceptional circumstances, an issue may be escalated to director, executive director, the Leader and/or chief executive, or their nominated deputies, at this stage.



INFORMATION GATHERING

The MRO will indicate the deadline provided by the journalist or any other relevant time pressures. The default deadline should normally be assumed to be 24 hours. The head of service provides feedback and relevant information (facts and position) – ideally in written bullet points. Any tables or additional data should be provided along with a written explanation. Wherever possible this information should be provided to the MRO allowing time for a response to be written and agreed by all parties within the deadline provided by the journalist.



RESPONSE

The MRO drafts a statement/release based on the information provided and includes a quote from the Cabinet member for the service area.

Wherever possible, MROs provide quotes from a named individual. Occasionally, statements may be attributed to a 'spokesperson' or a 'council officer' – if they are operational and service related. The relevant cabinet member should approve this approach.

Statements should not be attributed to officers or a spokesperson if they are policy related. The exception to this rule is during the pre-election period, also known as 'purdah', when senior managers will be the quoted spokespersons.

Committee chairs should be quoted on all media enquiries relating to committee decisions.



SIGN-OFF

All media releases and statements must have both officers' and elected member sign off before being issued. This will usually mean the head of service (or their deputy/senior nominee) and the relevant cabinet or committee member or their deputy.

If the subject matter 'cross cuts' different services, the head of service must advise the MRO who else to copy the release/statement to for comment and approval.

In exceptional circumstances, if the statement/release is determined to represent a significant reputational risk it should also be submitted to the council leader and chief executive for comment and approval. Where appropriate, such as dealing with legal or financial matters, this may also be extended to include the head of legal services and/or chief financial officer.

Wherever possible, all approvals must be confirmed by email.

'Information bulletins' – such as those to notify residents urgently about an operational matter, e.g. a road accident, flooding etc – which are strictly factual and operational in nature, do *not* need cabinet member approval before being issued to the press.



DISTRIBUTION

All standard media releases are sent out to all appropriate media contacts via the team's distribution lists. Other external audiences can access the release from the council's website.

Internally, all media releases are sent to cabinet, senior management,, all members, the communications and media team and the council's website.

Statement responses to a media enquiry are only issued to the specific media source of the enquiry.



MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Cabinet members will usually be put forward (supported and briefed by an MRO) for all broadcast and print interviews that relate to council policy or operations in their area of responsibility.

Where the cabinet member is unavailable, their cabinet support member may substitute for them. Where appropriate, the council leader may be put forward for interview. Where the subject matter is purely operational and factual, and with the agreement of the relevant cabinet member, a relevant senior officer may be put forward.

The council leader will be put forward for interview where there are significant issues that affect the council as a whole or that cut across several portfolio areas. Where the leader is not available, he/she may nominate a senior officer, such as the chief executive, to take his/her place.

Ends.