

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Cabinet Member for Performance and Capacity

Date of Meeting: 13th September 2010
Report of: Communications and PR Manager
Subject/Title: Media Relations Protocol

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 This report is in relation to the Media Relations Protocol which has previously been approved by Cabinet. It has subsequently had minor revisions which are highlighted in red in the attached copy.

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Cabinet Member for Performance and Capacity approve the proposed minor changes to the Council's Media Relations Protocol as highlighted in the Appendix to the report.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 To expedite the approval of the protocol so that it may be brought into use with immediate affect.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 Not applicable.

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 Not applicable.

6.0 Policy Implications including - Climate change - Health

- 6.1 Not applicable.

7.0 Financial Implications

- 7.1 Not applicable.

8.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

- 8.1 As the range of issues covered by the media team and Council representatives is extremely wide, it is difficult to predict which if any may involve legal considerations. Judgement as to when legal advice or support may be necessary

must rest with the individuals concerned, but does need to be a factor to be considered in the publication of information.

9.0 Risk Management

9.1 Not applicable.

10.0 Background and Options

10.1 The Media Relations Protocol is needed to guide both Members and officers in their dealings with the media to ensure we follow best practice in enhancing and protecting the reputation of the Council.

11.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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Media Relations Protocol

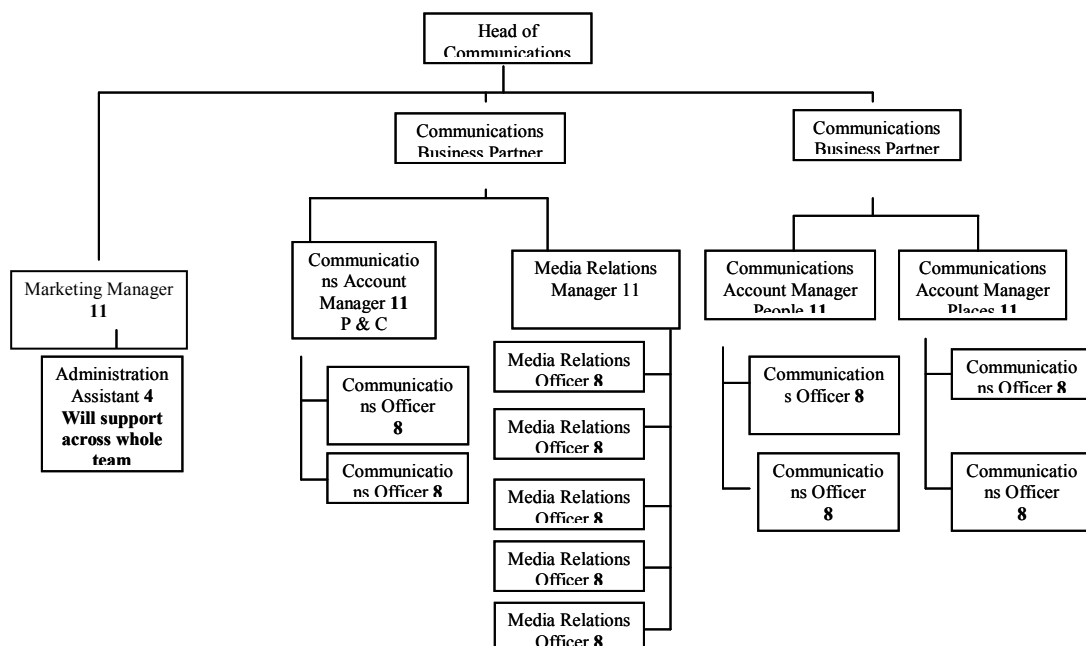
1.INTRODUCTION

This protocol serves as the definitive strategic positioning document for the Media Relations function of Cheshire East Council. It has been approved by Cabinet and Corporate Management Team (CMT).

The protocol also mirrors closely the guidelines and practices outlined in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, as recommended by the Department for Communities and Local Government. (Appx A).

2. STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

The Media Relations Team sits within the wider communications function. The Media Relations Manager works to the Communications Business Partner for Performance and Capacity who is the strategic lead. The Media Relations Manager provides the operational lead and manages the team on a day-to-day basis.



3.MEDIA RELATIONS

3.1 Purpose of Media Relations Team

The Media Relations Team sits within the Communications Team. All six members are highly-experienced journalists from the fields of print, radio and television. They hold either National Council for the Training of Journalists qualifications or those of the Broadcast Journalism Training Council.

The function of the team is to provide information to the media, in various formats to promote the work and policies of the Council in order to enhance its reputation at a local, regional and national level. It is also responsible for providing information, advice and guidance to officers and elected Members when the Council interacts with the media.

The objectives of the Media Relations team are:

- to inform residents of the services provided by Cheshire East Council;
- to promote and enhance the reputation of Cheshire East Council at local, regional and national levels;
- to protect and defend the reputation of Cheshire East Council at local, regional and national levels; and
- to offer media support, guidance and training for elected Members of the Council and senior officers.

The Media Relations Office is staffed from 8.30am to 5.30pm every week day. Outside these times is an on-call duty Media Relations Officer, who can be reached via the main Communications phone number 01270 686577.

A member of the Media Relations Team is available 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.

The Team produces information in a variety of formats:

- **Proactive Media Releases** - a written release promoting a service of, a decision of or the work of the Council. Through proactive coverage, the Council will be positioned in a positive and transparent light. The Media Relations Team advises on how best to place the right stories in the most appropriate outlet (eg radio, television, print, online, blog etc) with the best chance of success. The media expertise of the team will determine how proactive coverage is generated. Planning proactive coverage will form part of the wider communications plans for each of the Council's three directorates (People, Places and Policy and Performance).
- **Proactive Media Statements** - a written statement that is wholly in the words of a nominated Council spokesperson.

- **Reactive Media Releases** - generally issued as a rebuttal to an article or a broadcast already published and is generally in the words of a nominated Council spokesperson. As a large public body, it is inevitable that the Council will face regular scrutiny by the media, and on occasions, attack. The latter is often unfounded and will be challenged by the team on the day of issue or prior to publication if known about. The team will engage the support of Legal Services, if necessary, to counter any issues of potential defamation. On the occasions where the criticism is genuine, the team will respond with transparency and accountability. Responding to negative criticism will always be made as a considered judgement call by the Media Relations Team.
- **Reactive Media Statement** - a written statement that is prepared and issued in response to a specific question.
- **Information bulletins** - used when it is necessary to get vital information out to the public very quickly – eg school closures, gritting routes, refuse collections etc during period of adverse weather. These do not include a quote from anyone.
- **Briefing notes** – prepared in advance of either print or broadcast interviews.

3.2 Nominated Council Spokespeople

3.2.1 Use of ‘Council spokesperson’

Every effort will be made to attribute quotes to the relevant individuals as set out in 3.2.2 – 3.2.6 below. Only in exceptional circumstances will quotes be attributed to ‘a council spokesperson’.

3.2.2 Proactive Media Releases

Recognised best practice states that all proactive media releases should carry at least one quote: this should be from the relevant portfolio holder who is the appointed Council spokesperson for that portfolio or relevant ward member (see 3.2.2 below).

There may be occasions when, in the absence of the Portfolio Holder, a senior officer is quoted. Directors and Heads of Service should furnish the names of appointed officers for each service area to the Media Relations Team and ensure that the named officers are aware that they have been nominated.

If a Portfolio Holder is not available another spokesperson will be necessary. They should be chosen as follows:

- The relevant director or head of service or appointed spokesperson

If they are not available:

- The Portfolio Holder for Performance and Capacity

If they are not available:

- the Leader or the Chief Executive

In the very unlikely event that none of the above is available and in order to meet immediate media deadlines, the quote may be attributed to a Council spokesperson.

3.2.3 Proactive Media Releases and Ward Members

There will be occasions when another quote is needed for a proactive media release – e.g. from a service user in the form of a case study, or from the relevant Ward Member. The latter should be used only where that Ward Member has had significant input at a ward level in a project being promoted by the Council.

It is not possible for the Media Relations Team to know whether or not a Ward Member is significantly involved. It is therefore the responsibility of the service being promoted or the relevant portfolio holder to provide such information.

3.2.4 Reactive media statements

The Media Relations Team currently feeds 43 local media outlets, many of which pose several questions each day. There is only one evening paper and that covers just a small part of the Council's population. Other local print media outlets are weekly newspapers.

All newspapers, whether daily or weekly, carry daily deadlines. Pages are planned and completed as the week progresses, which means that all media queries, wherever possible, should be answered within one working day.

The Team has no control over the timing of these queries, although every effort is made to encourage the various media outlets to provide queries in a timely fashion or to negotiate for a story to be placed on a different page if a query cannot be answered within a newspaper's original timescale. Such encouragement and negotiation is not always successful, particularly if the story is contentious.

It is therefore essential that all media queries are given appropriate priority by all Members and officers of Cheshire East Council. A failure to provide a response in a timely fashion can seriously harm the reputation of the Council and be presented in such a way as to imply a lack of transparency while engendering an atmosphere of mistrust.

Few queries come in singularly, but rather regularly present themselves as one question among many. Again, the Team has no control over how the questions are posed. When several questions are posed at once, there can be considerable overlap in the service areas that need to be contacted for information and therefore overlap in the portfolio areas.

This lack of timeliness, coupled with several questions at a time, can and does mean that the relevant Portfolio Holder cannot be named in a response. However, it is recognised that statements made in the name of a Council spokesperson can lack the perceived integrity of those carrying the name of a person.

The Media Team will email full details of any query to the relevant senior officer who has been named as a nominated spokesperson and copy in the relevant Portfolio Holder. The time of the deadline will be clearly shown.

The media response will go out in the name of the relevant officer unless the Portfolio Holder indicates, within the timescale, whether he or she wants it to go in their name. If the Portfolio Holder is happy to leave the response to their appointed officer, it is requested that he or she informs the Media Relations Team as soon as possible.

The media will, on occasions, attempt to bypass the Media Relations Team. However, in order to protect the reputation of the Council, it is essential that all media enquiries are co-ordinated and managed effectively through the Media Relations Team.

It is vital for the team to be able to record and monitor ALL interaction with the media. If this is not done, the reputation of the Council is potentially at risk. It would be helpful to the Media Relations Team if elected Members were to log any interaction with the media.

The Media Relations Team will work closely with elected Members and officers, offering guidance and advice, in order to provide timely and effective responses to the media.

On occasion, an interview will be arranged for either an elected Member or officer. The Media Relations Team will provide briefings and advice and must accompany interviewees to interviews or be present on the line for telephone interviews (conference calls etc)

3.2.5 Broadcast interviews

On occasion, a radio or television interview will be arranged. The same rules for nominating a spokesperson apply as for proactive media releases.

The Media Relations Team will provide briefings and advice and must accompany interviewees to interviews or be present on the line for telephone interviews (conference calls etc)

3.2.6 Proactive releases from Scrutiny Committees

Proactive media releases may be issued when a Task and Finish Group is formed and again to report on the findings of the group. No media releases will be issued around subjects yet to be considered by the committees or where all relevant material is not available.

3.3 Media contact

3.3.1 Elected Members

The media will often attempt to contact elected Members directly.

If the nature of the enquiry relates to Council business and is non-political, the elected Member is requested to refer the enquiry to the Media Relations Team for initial handling and advice on procedure. By doing this, the Media Relations Team can record the query and either advise on the response or prepare and issue the response.

If the nature of the enquiry is political, in accordance with the democratic process, the elected Member has no duty to inform the Media Relations Team.

3.3.2 Officers

The media will also often attempt to contact employees of the Council directly.

The employee must always and immediately refer all enquiries from the media to the Media Relations Team as the first line of procedure. It is essential to record all media queries at the time of receipt. No initial comment or response to the media should be made by an employee. The Media Relations Team will provide advice on the most appropriate response.

Unauthorised comment by officers on behalf of the Council that is potentially harmful to its reputation may result in a disciplinary action.

3.3.4 Partners

The Council works closely with partners from all sectors. It is essential to ensure that when the Council is included in their media releases we approve the release and that we include them and consult them about releases we produce that involve their work.

3.4 Putting the Council's interest first

The central Media Relations Team's purpose is to represent the best interests of the Council in the media. Coverage of the decisions and work of elected Members and employees will be determined within a system of prioritisation, according to the current news agenda.

It is important to note that, on occasion, the most effective strategy is not to respond to the media. Media requests will be determined by both the news agenda and their prior agreement in directorate communications plans.

It will also be necessary to seek approval from other involved parties as appropriate.

Where elected Members are required to respond to the media regarding the policy of Cheshire East Council, such publicity should be objective and explanatory. While it may acknowledge the part played by individual elected Members as holders of particular positions in the Council, personalisation of issues or personal image-making must be avoided. (in accordance with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, as recommended by the Department for Communities and Local Government).

This protocol does not prevent any political group or individual elected Member not a portfolio holder issuing its/their own media information through its/their own channels. However, it is requested that all such information be copied to the Media Relations Team, where it will be held in confidence and used only to inform responses to media enquiries.

Exceptions to putting an elected Member forward for interview will arise during period of purdah or if there are potential conflicts of interest. In these cases, the Media Relations Team will identify a suitable alternative.

3.5 Corporate statements

On occasions, statements will be necessary that are corporate in nature and not related specifically to any portfolio. Either the Leader or the Chief Executive is the appropriate person to quote in these instances.

3.6 Media Monitoring

Monitoring the coverage of the Council in the daily media is the responsibility of the Communications Team. This is done in a variety of ways, using the best in modern technology and practice, including a media monitoring service.

Disseminating recorded media coverage of the Council to the various internal stakeholders is done in a clear, accessible and streamlined way.

3.7 Crisis media relations

A member of the Media Relations Team is available 365 days, 24 hours a day. In the event of a crisis breaking in the media outside of normal office hours (8.30am to 5.30pm), a duty Media Relations Officer is always on call **01270 686577**.

3.8 Confidentiality

The business of the Media Relations Team is highly confidential and all matters discussed within and by the team are treated with the highest standards of

discretion. It is essential that the team is briefed on all aspects of any issues, no matter how confidential or sensitive, to enable them to be best prepared for enquiries and put the interests of the Council first.

Occasionally, issues come to the notice of the media which involve employees or elected Members and aspects of their private lives or employment contracts. It is not the Council's policy to comment specifically on such issues. Responses must be brief and factual. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, names should not be included. An example statement would be:

"I can confirm that a member of staff has been suspended while an investigation into allegations of professional misconduct is carried out. Suspension in itself is not a form of punishment."

The exception to this rule is when the Council has been asked to provide a tribute following the death of an employee or elected Member. However, before any such tribute is issued, permission should be sought from the deceased's family.

3.9 Complaints about media coverage

Complaints about media reports should be referred to the Media Relations Manager or the Communications Business Partner to discuss appropriate action.

3.10 Media restrictions – purdah and embargoes

All publicity referring to a political party of anyone standing for election (local or parliamentary) must be suspended between the notice of an election and polling day. This period, which is known as purdah, is generally six weeks.

With the exception of the Mayor, Members will not be quoted in Council media releases and requests made to the Media Relations Team for media interviews with Members must be declined during this period.

During European elections, no publicity must be generated which refers to any of the candidates. Providing this practice is followed, it is not necessary to follow purdah instructions.

Occasionally a news release will contain information under embargo. Embargoes are not legally enforceable but are adhered to as standard industry practice by local and regional media, although not always by the national media. In order to assist the media with forward planning, embargoed releases may be issued in advance with the embargo indicated in bold and underlined at the top of the release.

4 MEDIA RELATIONS – WAYS OF WORKING

This area of the protocol covers all aspects of the operational function of the Media Relations Team.

4.1 Areas of responsibility

Each Media Relations Officer has responsibility for specific committees including scrutiny, and for two portfolio areas. Each holds regular meetings with each of their Portfolio Holders, Scrutiny Chairman/ Lead Scrutiny Officer –NB see paragraph 3.2.5.

4.2 Daily management of the Media Relations Office

a) Office hours

The Media Relations office is open from 8.30am to 5.30pm every week day. Outside these times, there is an on-call Media Relations Officer who can be reached via the main Communications phone number: **01270 686577**.

A member of the Media Relations team is available 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.

b) Administration

The Media Relations Team is responsible for:

- Management of media materials including newspapers
- General administration duties
- Maintenance of the shared drive for Media Relations
- Archiving of media material from Durrants
- Distribution lists for external and internal stakeholders

c) Housekeeping of written media relations material

All materials issued, including news releases and statements, by the media Relations Team are kept and maintained in the shared drive, to which only members of the Communications team have access.

d) Communicating with each other

Written communication between members of the Media Relations Team is principally done electronically.

Phone messages are sent between the team by email and all diary appointments are managed in Microsoft Outlook.

e) Daily media log

Every time a new request or phone call relating to a media enquiry is received by the Team, this is logged in a joint Media Log which is available in the Team's shared area.

This is monitored regularly by all members of the Team and is used by the Media Relations Manager to assess peaks and troughs in workload. It is also a helpful document as a 'handover' between team members at different periods of the day.

f) Distribution lists

News releases are issued only via email in order to record a 'paper trail' of the media outlets each release has been sent to.

The only external audience sent media releases by the Media Relations Team are the relevant media outlets. Other external audiences can obtain releases from the Council's website. Internally, all media releases are sent to members of Cabinet, all Councillors, CMT, all members of Communications and the Council's website. A hyperlink to the most recent news releases on the website is provided from the intranet.

4.3 On-call working

The on-call rota operates on a five-week cycle, with each Media Relations Officer carrying out one week on duty. The on-call period begins and finishes at 5.30pm each Friday. When an officer is on duty their work mobile phone and on-call blackberry must be switched on at all times and they must remain within two hour's travelling time of Westfields, Sandbach and consume no alcohol.

If an officer is unable to undertake their scheduled rota week, they should organise a swap with another officer on the rota and inform the Media Relations Manager of the change and their replacement.

The Media Relations Manager is not required to be part of the Media Relations on-call rota. However, s/he must be contactable by the duty on-call Media Relations Officer at all times, with the exception of periods of annual leave. The Media Relations Manager is always the first port-of-call for the on-call Media Relations Officer to offer advice and support if required.

If the on-call Media Relations Officer learns of an emergency out of office hours s/he will inform the Media relations Manager who will inform the Communications Business Partner, who will in turn inform the Head of Communications. The Head of Communications/ Communications Business Partner will be responsible for informing the Senior Manager Duty Officer from Extended Management Team.

4.4 Media monitoring

Monitoring the daily media coverage service (Durrants) is the responsibility of all members of the Communications team with acute focus by Media Relations.

The most recent and relevant local and regional newspapers are available to read in the following locations;

Westfields - Communications or Cabinet office
Municipal Buildings Crewe – Members Room
Macclesfield Town Hall – Members Room

All members of the Media Relations Team have full access to Durrants, an online news clippings service which monitors local, regional, national and international print and broadcast media for mentions of Cheshire East Council. Durrants updates are compiled at the end of each day and are received by the Team in an email summary the following morning.

Members of the Communications team also check the daily media monitoring service to ensure the Team is aware of stories as soon as they are published. Each article or broadcast is categorised depending on whether they are positive, negative or neutral and the percentage of each category is reported to elected Members each week.

Elected Members are also informed of how many potential readers or listeners have been reached each week and the total value of the coverage in advertising terms. **Each elected Member receives an electronic copy of this weekly media coverage report. Hard copies are placed in Members' Rooms in Crewe, Macclesfield and Sandbach.**

Negative coverage is assessed by the Media Relations Team and if it is incorrect and needs challenging, this will be done on the same day of publication.

Regional lunchtime TV and radio news bulletins are broadcast in the Communications office each day.

4.5 Media training for Council spokespeople

Media training for all relevant Council spokespeople is offered as appropriate.

All Members of Communications receive regular media training. This training is also available for:

Chief Executive

Leader

Cabinet

Scrutiny Chairmen

CMT – Corporate Directors and Heads of Service

4.6 Media Relations software

The Council uses Durrants software which provides a range of services for modern media relations practice including:

- Media cuttings
- Media searches
- News release distribution system
- Progress and output reports on coverage

4.7 News releases - general

News releases have the principal purpose of increasing public awareness of services provided by the Council and the functions it performs. All news releases must be written by a Media Relations Officer.

If a news release request is received directly from a directorate, the relevant Communications Business Partner must be made aware of this to ensure it falls within the general directorate communications plans.

Exceptions to quoting an elected Member will arise during period of purdah or if there are potential conflicts of interest. In these cases, the Media Relations Team will identify a suitable alternative.

All news releases must list the contact details of the relevant Media Relations Officer. It is not the Council's policy to include contact details of officers or elected Members, unless these are contained within the story text of the release.

News releases issued by partner organisations which refer to the authority must be approved by the Media Relations Team and include the appropriate elected Member comment. In the same way, those releases prepared by the Media Relations team involving partner organisations should also be approved by the partner organisations before issue.

4.8 Sign-off process for news releases

News releases must in the first instance receive approval from the requesting officer. If approval is also required from the requesting officer's line manager or other senior manager, obtaining this is the responsibility of the Media Relations Team.

Approval must next be gained from the relevant elected Member/Members. If an elected Member suggests significant changes, the amended release must be returned to the requesting directorate/service officer for final approval. The news release must receive full approval from the Media Relations Manager, or in his/her absence the Communications Business Partner, before it is issued.

4.9 Handling unusually sensitive issues

Occasionally a major incident or a significant issue which could affect the Council's reputation may arise. Any officer who becomes aware of a situation should inform the Media Relations Team immediately. As soon as a member of the Media Relations Team is informed they must brief the Media Relations Manager, Communications Business Partner and Head of Communications. This will trigger a process where all the appropriate people are informed, as follows:

- Chief Executive
- Leader
- Cabinet
- Elected Members

- Strategic Directors/Heads of Service
- Head of Service
- CMT
- Relevant Officers
- Partner Organisations

4.10 Knowing Council business – assessing and digesting agendas

All members of the Media Relations Team receive electronic agenda copies for all Council meetings inclusive of confidential papers from Democratic Services. It is the responsibility of each team member to be aware of the upcoming business. All members of the Media Relations Team must be aware of upcoming business for Cabinet and Full Council meetings.

Media Relations Officers must not arrange interviews with officers or elected Members on issues which appear on Council agendas before the meeting has taken place. It is acceptable for the Team to respond to media enquiries in advance of a meeting where a factual response only is required.

4.11 Photography

All requests for photography for media purposes must be passed through the Media Relations Team who will assess each request on a business need basis. As with all other photography, each directorate pays for its own photography, commissioned and managed by members of the Communications Team.

Each Media Relations Officer briefs the photographer on the requirements of the job and the Communications Assistant handles the IBS process therein.

4.12 Contact details for Media Relations

Communications
Cheshire East Council
Westfields
Middlwich Road CW11 1HZ
T: 01270 686577
E: communications@cheshireeast.gov.uk

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