

# Colchester Borough Council

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## Media Protocol

### INTRODUCTION

This protocol is governed by provisions in the Local Government Act 1986, the Local Government Act 1988, the Local Government Act 2000, and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (revised version April 2001).

All publicity and media activities adhere to the provisions of these acts and the code.

### 1 The role of Communications

- (1) The Council has a corporate communications team situated in Corporate Management whose purpose is to increase public awareness of the Council's services and functions, to explain to the public and stakeholders what the policies and priorities are, and to support the organisation in gathering public views on services, policies and priorities.
- (2) The team fulfils this role in part through the issuing of news releases, briefings, conferences and events. It also supports the media and members of the public who attend open meetings of the Council.
- (3) The communications team provides officers and Councillors with support on any communications matter that relates to the reputation of the Council as a whole or its policies and services, and assists with the re-energising of local democracy.
- (4) It will promote Council business and other activities through media releases and publications, quoting officers of the Council, partner organisations and/or service users, where their contributions add to the relevance and interest of the story.

### 2 Principles of Colchester Borough Council's relationship with the media

- (1) The Council is committed to effective communication so that citizens of the Borough of Colchester are well informed about the services that affect their lives every day. The local media play a valuable role, including the ability to reach large numbers of local residents.

The Council aims to provide a service to the media which is responsive and understands their needs. This is built on a basic principle of wanting to be open and transparent about the decisions the Council takes and who is accountable for those decisions.

- (2) The Council has a policy of allowing media access to a wide range of media trained officers to provide them with the factual information that they need. Media requests for comments or opinion on Council policy or political matters are generally referred to the appropriate Cabinet member. However if the

communications team are contacted first by the media, they will determine whether a Council officer or the relevant Portfolio Holder is better placed to answer the enquiry.

The names of group Spokespersons and Members of the Cabinet shall be made publicly available. The current media Spokespersons list (includes Council officers only) has been provided to all Cabinet members and can also be obtained from the communications team on x2285.

### **3 Roles and Responsibilities**

- (1) The Cabinet is the main decision making body and the appropriate Cabinet member will be the primary point of contact with the media on all policy matters. If the media contacts the communications team first they will determine whether the journalist should contact the Council officer (in the case of factual or technical information) or the relevant Portfolio Holder (in the case of policy or opinion).

It is the responsibility of the Cabinet member to ensure that, if they are contacted directly by the media, they inform either the Leader or Deputy Leader of the Cabinet (where applicable) and the communications team.

#### *Leader of the Council*

- (2) The Leader will be consulted on all general and strategic policy issues in addition to those within his/her portfolio responsibility. Under the Local Government Act 2000, the additional powers of well being and community leadership mean that the Council can legitimately become involved in and comment on issues which may be outside its own area of direct responsibility but have an impact on the community. It is on issues such as these that the Leader will take responsibility for deciding on a response in conjunction with the communications team if required.

#### *Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet*

- (3) The Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet will fulfil the Leader's role in the absence or unavailability of the Leader of the Council.

#### *Cabinet Members*

- (4) Cabinet members will be consulted on policy issues within their portfolio area only, both in terms of the issuing of news releases and responding to media enquiries.

#### *Chairmen of the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel and Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel*

- (5) In order to promote the role of overview and scrutiny within the overall democratic process, recommendations from the Panel will be publicised as applicable.. The appropriate Cabinet member and/or Leader of the Council will be informed in advance.

*Chairmen of Planning Committee, Licensing Committee and Accounts and Regulatory Committee*

- (6) Issues of public interest decided within the regulatory framework can be the subject of publicity, involving the Chairmen of the relevant regulatory committee in consultation with the relevant Cabinet member.

*Ward Councillors*

- (7) The Council recognises the importance of promoting the ward role of Councillors. This protocol allows for Ward Councillors to be quoted in news releases and to be a contact for the media on initiatives in their ward that promote the policies and services of the Council, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet member.

*Mayor*

- (8) The Mayor (and in his/her absence, the Deputy Mayor) shall be involved in the promotion of civic and ceremonial events on behalf of the Council, and other promotional activities undertaken in his/her capacity as Chairman of the Council will be publicised as appropriate.

*Officers*

- (9) It is the role of officers to provide factual information only.

#### **4 Use of Spokespersons**

*Quotations*

- (1) All those holding the above listed roles can be used as spokespersons within their area of responsibility – either in the issuing of news releases, in responding to media enquiries, or giving interviews relevant to their area of responsibility.
- (2) Officers should be used as lead spokespersons when the Council's reputation can be enhanced by raising the profile of a perceived 'expert' but only to the extent of factual material. As a principle, Councillors should lead on policy and service development issues, while officers, in consultation with the appropriate Cabinet member, should lead on technical, operational issues that require detailed expertise. If the Council has no policy on a particular matter and a Cabinet member wishes to comment, the same opportunity must be made available to Shadows.

*Opposition*

- (3) The political groups represented on the Council have designated spokespersons covering all aspects of the Council's business. The relevant person and their contact details will be provided by the communications team on all occasions.

## **5 Promoting Council Business**

### *Issuing of agendas*

- (1) It is intended that all meeting papers will be made available to the media via the Council's website and paper copies made available to the public at Angel Court five working days before the meeting concerned.

### *Media in attendance*

- (2) Staff from the communications team will provide assistance to members of the media who attend open meetings of the Council. They and the Committee Administrators must ensure that the media in attendance have the relevant papers, particularly those additional papers which may have been issued on the day.

### *Motions and questions*

- (3) Motions and questions of a political nature from individual Councillors shown on the agenda will not be publicised through the Council's communications team.

### *Debate reporting*

- (4) A reporter who has not attended the meeting but wishes to find out what was determined by the meeting should approach the Committee Administrator.

## **6 Issuing of News Releases**

### *Origination*

- (1) The drafting of a news release can be requested by those Councillors with the roles and responsibilities listed at section 3, officers, or initiated by members of the communications team. Where a policy issue is involved, the relevant Cabinet member should be consulted.

### *Clearance*

- (2) All news releases written by Council officers should be cleared with a Head of Service and a copy provided to the communications team in the first instance, and any Councillor quoted in the release must have the opportunity to agree content. If the appropriate Councillor is unavailable within the necessary timescale, it will be referred to the Leader or the Deputy Leader of the Council.

### *Targeting*

- (3) News releases should be targeted to those media outlets that cover the geographical area or specialism relevant to the subject matter of the release. The issuing of releases to all media outlets regardless of content will be avoided.

### *Ward Issues*

- (4) Where an initiative in a Councillor's ward reinforces the policies and services of the Council (eg a road improvement scheme, the opening of a day centre etc) and has the support of the Ward Councillor, a news release issued to publicise the initiative can include a quote from the Ward Councillor(s) after consultation with the relevant Cabinet member. This does not preclude a second quotation from the Cabinet member with portfolio responsibility if required.

### *Overview and Scrutiny*

- (5) There should be a balance in the publicity of the Council's business, between the decisions of the Cabinet and the activities of the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel and Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel. To this end, where a Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel and/or Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel is in agreement that a news release should be issued about a policy issue reviewed at its meeting, then the communications team will do this. The Chairman of the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel or Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel as appropriate will be offered the opportunity to be quoted within the release in his/her capacity as Chairman. The relevant portfolio holder will be made aware of the release being drafted and also offered the opportunity to be quoted within the release in order to develop an open democratic debate on issues through the Council's publicity mechanisms.

### *Regulatory Committees*

- (6) Where decisions of the Planning Committee, the Licensing Committee or Accounts and Regulatory Committee involves an issue of public interest, a news release can be issued involving the Chairman of the relevant committee.

### *Partnership releases*

- (7) News releases issued in partnership with other organisations should be encouraged where appropriate. The relevant Cabinet member will be consulted as usual but may not be quoted where it is agreed that the Council is not the lead agency and in the interests of producing succinct media releases. Wherever possible, such news releases should be issued on jointly headed paper, with each organisation's respective contact points made clear.

### *Use of embargoes*

- (8) Embargoes should only be used when considered essential. This would most typically be when a news release is linked to a launch event, when an issue of confidentiality requires it, or when a third party requires it (eg announcement of award or additional funding). Embargoes are not legally enforceable and are adhered to by general local agreement.

### *Contacts*

- (9) At the end of each news release, in the note to editors, relevant contact details for the relevant Portfolio Holder must be provided. In addition, an appropriate officer contact must be included, this may on occasion, be an officer from the communications team.

### *Distribution*

- (10) The Leader and Deputy Leader will be sent the news release by email prior to its general release to the media, and the communications team will make reasonable attempts to ensure those people are aware it is on their email.
- (11) Other Councillors who have requested copies by email of all news releases issued by the communications team will be sent them as they are issued to the media.
- (12) The priority means of distributing news releases to the media will be by email, unless a media outlet requires an alternative format but this is to be discouraged. It is intended that news releases will be posted on the Council's website as they are issued to the media.

### *Use of photographs*

- (13) Wherever possible, news releases should be accompanied by either a photo or the offer of a photo opportunity.

## **7 Use of media briefings**

- (1) The use of media briefings is to be encouraged and fits with the principles of our relationship with the media indicated in section 2. On major policy issues such as budget setting, a briefing for the media should take place as early in the process as possible. When such briefings are arranged, the relevant Cabinet member will provide the actual briefing. Spokespersons will be notified of the briefing and will be afforded access to the media following the conclusion of the briefing by the Cabinet member. However, if the purpose of briefing is purely factual, the relevant service manager will provide the actual briefing.

## **8 Responding to enquiries**

- (1) The communications team will respond to enquiries as promptly as possible, taking into account the media's deadlines. Information will be obtained from officers and the relevant Cabinet members consulted prior to redirecting media enquiries or issuing responses on enquiries relating to policy issues.

### *Use of releases*

- (2) Where a controversial issue is the subject of media attention, the communications team will prepare, in consultation with officers and the relevant Cabinet member, a statement for issuing to media.

## **9 Elections**

- (1) The Council will follow the guidelines contained in the Code of Practice on Local Government publicity, ie "The period between the notice of election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election."

Consequently, no Councillors will be quoted in any releases during the period outlined above.

- (2) Wider publicity initiatives also need to be considered carefully during this period. The Code of Practice states that:

“Publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in such a way that identifies them with individual members or groups of members.” In addition; “Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve members likely to be standing for election.”

- (3) Any prospective candidates (parliamentary, county and borough) requesting visits to Council premises must be treated equally. There is no requirement for such visits to be refused. However, Council staff should not be included in any photographs that candidates might arrange during such visits.

## **10 Confidential Information**

- (1) Any Council information provided to a Councillor must only be used by the Councillor in connection with the proper performance of their duties as a Member of the Council. Confidential information should not be disclosed to the media, discussed with or released to any other persons. Such disclosure would be a betrayal of trust. In particular, Councillors should never disclose or use confidential information for the personal advantage of themselves or of anyone known to them, or to the disadvantage or the discredit of the Council or anyone else.

## **11 Media Training**

- (1) The communications team will provide training to both Councillors and staff which encourages a positive relationship with the media and provides information on the best ways to get their information across.

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