

PART 6

6.2 Media Protocols

MEDIA PROTOCOLS

1. Context

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.

2. The role of Communications

The purpose of Suffolk County Council corporate communications team 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 keep County Council staff informed of the working of the authority.

The team fulfils this role in part through the issuing of news releases, briefings, conferences and events. They also support the media and members of the public who attend all open meetings of the county council.

The communications team provides officers and county 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.

It will promote county council business and other activities through media releases and publications, quoting officers of the county council, partner organisations and/or service users, where their contributions add to the relevance and interest of the story.

3. Principles of Suffolk County Council's relationship with the media

The County Council is committed to effective communication so that citizens of the county are well informed about the services that affect their lives every day. The local media play a valuable role in Suffolk life, including the ability to reach large numbers of local residents. The County 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 County Council takes and who is accountable for those decisions.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

Leader

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 County 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.

Deputy Leader

The Deputy Leader of the Council will fulfil the Leader's role if the Leader is absent or otherwise unavailable.

Cabinet Members

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

Chairmen of Scrutiny Committees

In order to promote the role of scrutiny within the overall democratic process, recommendations from these committees will be communicated. The appropriate Cabinet Member and/or Leader of the Council will be informed in advance.

Locality Councillors

The County Council recognises the importance of promoting the locality role of councillors. This protocol allows for local councillors to be quoted in news releases and be a contact for the media on initiatives in their division that promote the policies and services of the county council, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member.

Chairman of the County Council

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

5. Use of Spokespeople

Quotations

All those holding the above listed roles can be used as spokespeople 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.

In addition, officers should be used as lead spokespeople when the county council's reputation can be enhanced by raising the profile of a perceived 'expert'. 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.

Opposition

The political groups represented on the county council have designated spokespeople covering all aspects of the county council's business. The

relevant person and their contact details will be provided by the communications team when requested by the media.

6. Promoting Council Business

Issuing of agendas

All committee papers should be made available to the media via the county council's website no later than five working days before the meeting concerned.

Media in attendance

Members of the media who attend open meetings of the county council should be looked after by staff from the communications team. 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

Motions and questions from individual councillors shown on the agenda will not be publicised through County Council news releases.

Debate reporting

Where a reporter who has not attended the meeting wishes to find out what was said by individual councillors during a debate, officers would refer them to the appropriate Chairman direct.

7. Issuing of News Releases

Origination

The drafting of a news release can be requested by those councillors with the roles and responsibilities listed at section 4, officers, or initiated by members of the communications team. Where a policy issue is involved, the relevant Cabinet Member should be consulted.

Clearance

All news releases should be cleared with an officer 'expert' 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 Deputy Leader of the Council.

Targeting

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 panacea issuing of releases to all media outlets regardless of content should be avoided.

Locality Issues

Where an initiative in a councillor's division reinforces the policies and services of the county council (e.g. a road improvement scheme, the building of a school extension, the opening of a day centre etc) and has the support of the local councillor, a news release issued to publicise the

initiative can include a quote from the local councillor in consultation with the relevant Cabinet member. This does not preclude a second quotation from the Cabinet member with portfolio responsibility if required.

However, initiatives developed as part of a councillor's locality budget within their division will not be the subject of county council news releases. Individual councillors will be encouraged to promote initiatives funded through their locality budget, and the communications team will provide advice on relevant media contacts.

Scrutiny

There should be a balance in the publicity of the county council's business, between the decisions of the Cabinet and the activities of Scrutiny Committees. To this end, where a Scrutiny Committee 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 relevant Scrutiny Committee will be offered the opportunity to be quoted within the release in their capacity as Chairman. The relevant Cabinet Member 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 county council's publicity mechanisms.

Partnership releases

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

Use of embargoes

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 (e.g. announcement of award or additional funding). Embargoes are not legally enforceable and are adhered to by general local agreement.

Contacts

At the end of each news release, in the note to editors, relevant contact details for all political groups must be provided. In addition, an appropriate officer contact must be provided.

Distribution

Anyone listed in the contact points should be sent the news release by email prior to its general release to the media, and the communications team should make reasonable attempts to ensure those people are aware it is on their email.

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.

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. News releases will be posted on the county council's website as they are issued to the media.

Use of photographs

Wherever possible, news releases should be accompanied by either the offer of a photo opportunity which is likely to be of interest to the media or a relevant photograph. These should also be sent to the media electronically. The communications team oversees an electronic photo library, including up-to-date photographs of all councillors and leading officers.

8. Use of media briefings

The use of media briefings is to be encouraged and fits with the principles of our relationship with the media indicated in section 3. 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 opposition will be notified and offered the opportunity to hold their briefing of the media following the Administration's briefing.

9. Responding to enquiries

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 Cabinet Members consulted on responses to policy issues.

Use of statements

Where a controversial issue is the subject of media attention, the communications team will prepare, in consultation with officers and the Cabinet Member, a statement for issuing to media.

10. Run-up to elections

Between the notice of an election and the election itself the County Council will follow the guidelines set out in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity, namely that

- (a) The Council cannot publish proactive publicity in any form which relates to candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election;
- (b) 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.

- (c) Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve members who are or who are likely to be standing for election and other members who are directly involved in the elections.
- (d) Councillors holding key political or civic positions can only comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the Council's control;
- (e) The Council can respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided the answers are factual and not party political.
- (f) Any prospective candidates (parliamentary, county and district) requesting visits to County Council premises must be treated equally. There is no requirement for such visits to be refused. However, County Council staff should not be included in any photographs that candidates might arrange during such visits.

11. Media Training

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.