

PUBLICITY & MEDIA RELATIONS PROTOCOL

Communications & Engagement
Education, People & Business

June 2017

Contents

- 1. Aim of the protocol**
- 2. Background**
 - 2.1 The legal context**
- 3. The Activities**
 - 3.1 Press releases**
 - 3.2 Press statements**
 - 3.3 Press enquiries**
 - 3.4 Photocalls**
 - 3.5 Official Opening of Council Buildings and Facilities**
- 4. Partnership Working**
- 5. Education and Schools**
- 6. Emergency Media Relations**
- 7. Publicity ahead of Elections**

Publicity & Media Relations Protocol

1. Aim of the protocol

The aim of this document is to define a protocol for media relations and it covers a number of activities, including:

- Press releases
- Press statements
- Press enquiries
- Photocalls

Sections have also been included to provide guidance on the following:

- Partnerships
- Education and Schools
- Emergency media relations
- Publicity ahead of elections

The protocol covers the role of the Leader and Depute Leader, Conveners and Vice Conveners, the Provost and Depute Provost and local ward members. It also includes the role of elected members who represent the Council on Community Planning Partnerships and external bodies.

Observance of this protocol will ensure that officers are able to act consistently within members' expectations whilst working within the national guidelines which govern their apolitical role in the Council. It is hoped that this protocol will also assist elected members in developing a clear understanding of what is, and what is not, appropriate activity for officers who deal with media relations.

2. Background

A clear protocol, with definitive guidelines, is a useful reference point for elected members and senior officers alike in setting out how interaction with the media is undertaken on behalf of the Council. This will help to prevent unnecessary conflict and the associated pressure placed on officers where these issues have not been clearly defined in the past.

It is important to remember that all Council officers are bound by their contract of employment to be non-political in their actions and in the work that they produce, in accordance with section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986. Press releases that are political in nature cannot be issued by the Council's Corporate Communications Team.

The Council's Communications & Engagement Team is also bound by the guidelines contained within the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 1988, which is attached for ease of reference. Particular attention is drawn to paragraphs 39 to 42, which deal with publicity about individual members of an authority.

2.1 The legal context

All publicity the Council produces should comply with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, issued under the Local Government Act 1986. Local authorities are obliged to have regard to the Code in coming to any decisions on publicity.

Paragraph 20 of the Code defines the purposes of local authority publicity as:

“To increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs; to explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities; and in general to improve local accountability.”

Publicity & Media Relations Protocol

Paragraphs 39 and 40 of the Code say the following about individual members of an authority:

“The functions of a local authority are discharged by the Council corporately. It is therefore inappropriate for public resources to be used to publicise individual councillors.

“In the interests of public accountability, however, it may be appropriate to give publicity to the views or activities of individual members when they are representing the council as a whole: for example, when the chairman of a council speaks or acts as the first citizen of the whole community, or when a chairman of a committee opens a new scheme or launches a policy approved by the council or by his committee on the council’s behalf.”

The Code applies to media relations work as well as other forms of communication and publicity produced by the Council.

The Communications & Engagement Team can arrange copies of the code.

3. The Activities

Throughout this section, it shall be taken as read that if the Leader is unavailable the Deputy Leader will be approached, if the Provost is unavailable the Deputy Provost will be approached and if the relevant Committee Convener is unavailable, the Vice-Convenor will be approached.

3.1 Media Releases

3.1.1 Involvement of Conveners and Vice Conveners

Press releases are written by officers to promote the work of the Council, publicise Council decisions and policies, and highlight developments in services. The majority of press releases will therefore contain a quote from the Convener of the relevant committee as the elected member with responsibility for those issues in terms of the Council’s Administration Scheme.

For issues that cross a number of services or Committees, the Council Leader will be quoted in press releases rather than quotes from a number of different Committee Conveners.

The Provost will be quoted on civic issues and on issues arising from the Provost’s activities and attendance at events.

3.1.2 Approval Process

No press release will be issued until the content is approved by a senior officer from the relevant service and Councillors who have been quoted have approved the text.

3.1.3 Media releases following meetings

News releases confirming the decisions taken at meetings will be identified by the Communications & Engagement Team and issued following consultation with the Council Leader or Committee Convener. Requests for press releases should be made prior to the meeting where possible to allow for the speedy issue of the release following the meeting.

Publicity & Media Relations Protocol

Normally releases giving information on decisions taken should not be issued more than 24 hours after the conclusion of the meeting as a longer delay greatly reduces the chances of them being used.

If for any reason the Leader or the relevant Convener is not available to supply a quote within 24 hours of the conclusion of the meeting, a factual release will be issued without any quotes and the journalists will be requested to contact the relevant Convener themselves for comment.

Media releases may summarise the debate on an issue but will not identify individual speakers. Where the decision is based on a motion to Council, the proposer of the motion may be named, but only the Convener will be quoted.

3.1.4 Media Release Distribution

All media releases will be emailed to all elected members on the day they are issued to the media and Communications & Engagement will endeavour to publish press releases on the Council's website within two working days.

3.2 Media statements

In some circumstances, the Communications & Engagement Team will prepare written statements to issue to the media on request in relation to matters where enquiries are anticipated. These are mainly used in sensitive situations and they are not usually for general release, but only issued in response to specific enquiries.

3.3 Media Enquiries

3.3.1 Volume of Media Enquiries

The Communications & Engagement Team responds to almost 1000 enquiries from local, national and broadcast media on an annual basis and provides an out-of-hours media enquiry service.

Given the huge number of enquiries the Team receives and given that almost 50% are received on deadline day, some leeway must be given to officers to enable deadlines to be met.

Only members of the Corporate Management Team and the Communications & Engagement Team are authorised to issue comments to the media as Council spokespeople.

3.3.2 Responding to Media Enquiries

Responses to enquiries are sought from a senior officer from the relevant service and are either attributed to the relevant Convener or a named Council spokesperson (usually the Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executives, Strategic Leads and Service Managers). All enquiries, and responses, are recorded within a database for future reference.

Responses to enquiries are given on behalf of the Council as a body, and in accordance with policies agreed and adopted by the Council. It is therefore appropriate that the responses to enquiries are given in the name of the relevant Convener or a senior officer, but not from other elected members under normal circumstances.

Publicity & Media Relations Protocol

Where a media enquiry has been instigated by any Councillor, MP or MSP or if the enquiry is as a result of a Council or Committee decision, a response will normally be issued from the Council Leader or relevant Convener.

Where a media enquiry has been instigated by a member of the public or other means, then the response will normally be issued by a named Council Spokesperson. If it is a sensitive or high profile enquiry, the Council Leader and/or relevant Committee Convener will be advised by email.

3.3.3 Political Media Enquiries

It is for elected members of all party groups to make their own arrangements for issuing directly party political material to the media.

Because of the apolitical role of officers, the Communications & Engagement Team cannot become involved in differences of view between political parties other than confirming Council policy.

Journalists approaching the Council Communications & Engagement Team with enquiries that are deemed political will be advised of this and will be asked to contact the elected member or political party directly.

3.3.4 Involvement of other Councillors

As detailed above, responses to enquiries will only be issued in the name of the Council Leader, appropriate Convener or named Council spokesperson. It is not appropriate for a Council comment to be issued in the name of, or cleared by, any other elected member.

3.4 Photocalls

3.4.1 Involvement of Conveners

Photo calls, like media releases, are used to promote the work of the Council, publicise Council decisions and highlight developments in services. The Council Leader or relevant Convener will therefore be invited to attend photo calls.

3.4.2 Involvement of other Councillors

Many photo calls take place at locations around the Council eg. in a park or school. Inevitably, the site chosen for the photocall will be in a ward, not necessarily that of the Convener.

Where a photo call organised by the Communication & Engagement Team is promoting a local facility or using a site visit to highlight a local issue, the presumption will be that the three local ward members should be invited to attend. It is not practical to quote all local ward members in resulting press releases, however, the names of the ward members will be provided to the media as attending. Therefore, only the Convener will be quoted.

3.4.3 Requests by Local Members

Occasionally, local members ask for photocalls to be arranged to publicise issues or events in their ward which they are involved in and which accord with Council policy.

Publicity & Media Relations Protocol

Where a photo call is arranged by the Council's Communications & Engagement Team under these circumstances, the presumption will be that all three local ward members should be invited and that the relevant Convener should also be invited to attend.

Local Members may of course contact the media independently to promote activities they are undertaking.

3.4.4 Involvement of Officers

Photo calls involving the attendance of Officers should always be arranged through the Communications & Engagement Team and be in line with this Protocol.

3.5 Official Opening of Council Buildings and Facilities

The official opening of Council buildings and facilities will be the responsibility of the Civic Office. The Provost will be invited to open all such buildings and facilities as a civic function, whom failing the Depute Provost. In the event that neither the Provost nor Depute provost are available to officiate at an opening, then it will be for the Provost and Depute Provost to delegate the opening to an agreed nominee.

4. Partnerships

Where the Council is involved in issuing a press release as part of a partnership arrangement, the partnership's arrangements for who to quote must be followed. This would normally be the chair of the organisation. In the case of a press release being prepared on behalf of a number of partners it may be appropriate to offer each partner an opportunity to be quoted. All partners should be given an opportunity to approve the release within a stated timeframe.

The Council's quote within a partnership press release will be from the relevant Convener or from the Council Leader

In partnerships where the Council is not the lead and is not issuing the press release, the Communications & Engagement Team should be contacted by the lead partner in order to provide a quote from the relevant Council representative within an agreed timeframe.

Council officers should ensure that Communications & Engagement are aware of partnership initiatives the Council is involved in and that the lead partner is provided with the Communications & Engagement Team contact details to ensure that the publicity and media relations protocol is followed.

Where a partnership initiative is being promoted through a photo call, all Councillors who represent the Council on the partnership should be invited to the photo call.

5. Education and Schools

Schools have developed their own positive relationships with the local media. They liaise directly with the two local papers in East Dunbartonshire to promote school activities and organise photocalls. The Communications & Engagement Team does not have the resources to take on the day to day promotion of school activities with the local media. Guidance and advice is always available from the Communications & Engagement Team and direct relationships between schools and the local media should continue.

Circumstances where schools should liaise with Communications & Engagement are as follows:

5.1 Publication of HMle Reports

These are promoted to the local, national and specialist education media. A photocall is set up with the school and the Convener of Education.

5.2 Involvement with broadcast media

The Communications & Engagement team should be advised of any school initiative involving the broadcast media. Communications & Engagement will ensure that all protocols are followed and that the Council is appropriately represented.

5.3 Visits from Ministers, MPs and MSPs

Communications & Engagement should be advised of any visits to schools from MPs MSPs and Ministers. The Corporate Communications team will ensure that the Protocol for dealing with MPs, MSPs and MEPs is followed in addition to the media relations protocol.

5.4 National sponsorship and promotional projects

To ensure that appropriate protocols are followed, schools participating in any promotional or sponsorship projects with other organisations should inform the Education Service and the Communications & Engagement Team. Guidance and support will be provided for publicity and media relations in relation to these projects.

5.5 Major/Emergency Incidents

In line with the Council's approach to dealing with major or emergency situations, the Communications & Engagement team will lead on all media relations and support the wider communications requirements in relation to a major/emergency issue or incident involving schools (see below).

6. Emergency Media Relations

There are times when the Council's response to the media needs to be tightly controlled. These instances will normally relate to times when the Council becomes the focus of national media attention for issues such as major incidents.

The Council, as part of its Emergency Plan, has a Civil Emergency Communications Plan which addresses how to handle the media in such circumstances. The Council has also signed up to the West of Scotland Regional Resilience Partnership (WoSRRP) Public Communications Plan which defines the approach to communication across the Partnership, highlights which organisation should lead communications under specific circumstances and contains a mutual aid agreement between the partners.

If the Council's Emergency Plan is brought into use, all of the Council's media relations work must be done in conjunction with the Civil Emergency Communications Plan.

If the Council experiences its own emergency situation and invokes its Business Continuity Plan, the Communications & Engagement Team will invoke its Business Continuity communications arrangements. All media relations activity will be managed in conjunction with this.

7. Publicity ahead of elections

In the period directly before an election (usually six weeks or the period from the Notice of Election to the election itself), Councils must be careful about what they publicise.

The Code of Recommended Practice says:

“The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election. 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. However, it is acceptable for the authority to respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided that their answers are factual and not party political. Members holding key political or civil positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the authority’s control. Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve members likely to be standing for election.”

In pre-election circumstances, where a quote is required, the Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executives or relevant senior officer may be quoted.

Local circumstances may mean that some proactive events need to take place in this period, in which case, following advice from the Council’s Monitoring Officer, any approved publicity photocalls and media releases should include representatives from all political parties in the Council. Guidance on this is normally circulated prior to the election period by the Monitoring Officer.