

17. Communications Protocol

This protocol covers the legal framework, the role of the Communications Team, principles of effective communication, council spokespeople, clearing and dissemination of press releases, handling media enquiries and interviews, corporate identity and council publications. It also deals with publicising the work of Full Council, the Cabinet, and the Corporate Scrutiny Committee and any committees or sub-committees thereof.

The council's Cabinet is the guardian of the protocol. It is reviewed regularly to ensure it is up to date.

Introduction

The purpose of this protocol is to explain the council's processes, quality standards and principles in relation to communications activity. It offers guidance and a clear set of rules which both officers and members are required to uphold.

It is not the council's Communications Strategy, which is agreed each year and forms the Communications Team workplan. In delivering the Communications Strategy, the council will uphold this protocol.

The legal framework

Local authorities are required by section 4(1) of the Local Government Act (LGA) 1986 (as amended by the LGA 1988) to have regard to the [Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#) in coming to any decision on publicity.

The code recognises that local authorities are accountable to the electorate and local accountability requires local understanding. Local authorities also need to tell the public about the services which they provide. The code encourages effective publicity aimed at improved public awareness of the council's activities. However, publicity is a sensitive matter in any political environment because of the impact it can have. It is essential to ensure that proper decisions are made on publicity in accordance with clear principles of good practice. The purpose of the code is to set out those principles.

The Communications Team

- Raise awareness and improve understanding of council services through communications that are timely, accurate, clear and accessible.
- Aspire to deliver the highest standards of council communications, implementing existing best practice from other authorities.
- Serve the council and offer support and advice to officers and members.
- Observe all relevant legislation and comply with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
- Proactively develop relationships with Island organisations, broadcast, print and specialist media and others to maximise PR opportunities for the council.
- Use proactive communications to protect and enhance the reputation of the council, recruit and retain good staff and help win additional resources for the Island.
- Use internal communications to engage staff and explain the challenges faced in changing the organisation.
- Design communication campaigns that change public perceptions and increase take up of services.

Principles of effective communication

- **PRIORITY:** Effective communications in terms of informing, listening and explaining to stakeholder groups is regarded as a priority by the authority.
- **STRATEGY:** Proactive communications to promote the Island, protect and enhance the reputation of the council, recruit and retain good staff and help win additional resources for the Island.
- **THE MESSAGE:** We are proud of this authority because it delivers good value local services that are raising standards and creating opportunity on the Isle of Wight.
- **OPERATIONS:** The corporate communications team is responsible for the operational delivery of the media relations, publications, web content and core internal communications of the council.
- **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS:** We will develop positive relationships with Island organisations, media and others to maximise promotional opportunities for the council. We will vigorously defend the reputation of the council and rebut inaccurate reporting of the council's activities and plans.
- **PLANNING:** The communications team will produce an annual communications work plan based around delivering corporate activities and delivering a series of campaigns that support service objectives. We will schedule activity through the communications grid to forecast likely demands on time and significant news events. Members and officers must feed news events into the communications team on a weekly basis.
- **ONE VOICE:** Staff and councillors recognise their leading role in terms of actions and behaviours in building the reputation of the authority. They should act, and communicate consistently, taking responsibility and explaining the reasons for decisions. The credibility of the media team rests on the fact that it is the authoritative and accurate voice of the council. All media requests are channeled through communications and any direct approaches from journalists should be reported back to the team.
- **PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE:** Building reputation and strong brand values will take a significant amount of time. It will require discipline, patience and time. Councillors and staff members will have to use every media opportunity, marketing tools, internal communications and action following consultation to convince the public that the Isle of Wight is providing good value local services.

Spokespersons and media comment

The usual divide between staff and councillor comment is based on whether the story contains 'policy' matters (councillor comment) or 'operational' issues (officers' response). In practice the dividing lines can be blurred and so the media team will gauge what sort of spokesperson will be required to respond to a story – authoritative or compassionate, staff member or councillor.

The council's key spokespersons are the Executive Leader, the Deputy Leader and Cabinet members within their portfolios. They will be featured in any publicity where it relates to their responsibility on the council.

The Chief Executive, chief officers and senior managers (as agreed by the media team) will also act as spokespersons on their areas of expertise, ensuring any comment is based on factual information in line with council policy.

Council officers will not discuss council business with the press without the prior permission of the Communications Team. This includes speaking, emailing, writing or giving interviews. All press enquiries should be referred to the media team.

No officer should publicise confidential information gained in the course of their work, maliciously undermine the council by adverse or negative comments, take personal issues concerning their employment to the media, or bring the council into disrepute by their actions or views expressed.

No councillor should discuss or disclose confidential or exempt information to the media, impugn the professional integrity of officers, make personal attacks or undermine respect for officers or bring the council into disrepute as a corporate body in any public forum, but this is not intended to inhibit proper political scrutiny of the administration.

The credibility of the Communications Team rests on the fact that it is the authoritative and accurate voice of the council. It is essential that all media requests are channeled through communications and that any direct approaches from journalists be reported back to the team to deal with.

Drafting and clearing press releases

There is a difference between a press release and a story. A press release is a vehicle used for transferring information from a press office to a journalist. It is not the subsequent story that will appear in the media. It is crucially important to remember this when drafting or approving press releases. They are just adverts for a particular story. What will get them covered is the ability to deploy supporting arguments in terms of expert witnesses, new evidence, interesting figures or punchy comments.

In most cases it is expected that clearance for media comment and press releases will occur by the end of the day when comment or clearance is requested, with a target clearance time of four hours.

If clearance is not forthcoming from the Cabinet member or chief officer, the communications team will contact the next person in the chain of command to ensure deadlines can be met.

Full Council, Cabinet and other decision-making bodies

A media officer will be assigned to cover the activities of all key decision making bodies to ensure the decisions that are taken are clearly communicated to the relevant target audiences.

Where appropriate, press releases will be issued with agendas highlighting key items as agreed with the Leader, portfolio holder or Chief Executive. Quotes may be included from the Leader, appropriate portfolio holder or chairman to explain and publicise council policies and services.

Motions and questions from individual councillors shown on any agenda will not be publicised through the Communications Team.

If appropriate a press release will be issued following the meeting, describing a decision and quoting the leader, portfolio holder or chairman.

All communication relating to the work of any decision making body must be agreed by the Communications Team. Any comment made by the chairman in relation to the work of their committee must come through the Communications Team.

The Communications Team manager will decide on requests for press releases from decision-making body chairmen. In the event of a dispute, the final decision will be taken by the relevant chief officer.

Corporate Scrutiny Committee

A media officer will be assigned to cover the activities of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to ensure the work of this body is effectively communicated.

Where appropriate, press releases will be issued with agendas highlighting key items as agreed with the chairman of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee. Quotes may be included from the chairman of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to explain and publicise the work of committee.

Appropriate senior officers will be consulted on the preparation of press releases.

All communication relating to the work of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee must be agreed by the council's Communications Team. Any comment made by the chairman of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee in relation to the work of their committee must come through the Communications Team.

The Communications Team manager will decide on requests for press releases from the Corporate Scrutiny Committee. In the event of a dispute, the final decision will be taken by the Chief Executive.

Individual councillors

Press releases will not be issued by the Communications Team on behalf of individual councillors.

Individual councillors should make their own group leaders aware of any media activity they are undertaking and should keep the Communications Team informed in case of enquiries.

The Communications Team will not promote the views of individual councillors.