

Media and Social Media Protocols

1. Introduction

- 1.1 These protocols provide guidelines for officers and elected Members when dealing with the media and social media. They also clarify the role of the Communications Team in managing media relations for the Authority.
- 1.2 The people of Calderdale pay for the Council's services through local and national taxation and are entitled to be well informed about what the Council does, the decisions it makes on their behalf and the services that it offers. We rely on a variety of media and social media platforms to do this.
- 1.3 The way the Council is portrayed in the media has a significant influence on the way it is perceived, the satisfaction of our residents and general confidence in local government and the democratic process.

2. The Legal Framework

- 2.1. The Local Government Acts place tight restrictions on what and who the Council can legally publicise. This prohibits authorities from issuing material that "in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party". This rule applies at all times and not just before an election.
- 2.2. All Councils are required to have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. This was first issued in 1988 and has been subject to a number of revisions since, the latest version being approved in the summer of 2011.
- 2.3. The Code defines the main functions of local authority publicity:
"To increase public awareness of the services provided by the Authority and the functions it performs; to allow local people a real and informed say about local issues that affect them; to explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities and in general to improve local accountability."
- 2.4. The Code says Council communications should:
 - be lawful
 - be cost effective
 - be objective
 - be even-handed
 - be appropriate

- have regard to equality and diversity
 - be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.
- 2.5. Where Council publicity quotes an individual, the Code says that this must be '*where this is relevant to his/her responsibilities within the Council*'. This means that Cabinet Members, Chairs of Scrutiny and other Committees/Panels (i.e. Audit, Standards, Licensing and Regulatory, and Planning) may be quoted.

3. Media Activity for Council Meetings, Services and Events

- 3.1. Council Meetings: Media releases can be issued by the Communications Team with agendas before the meeting of the Council. They should highlight key items for discussion as agreed with the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council. They should quote the Leader of the Council or the appropriate Cabinet Member/Committee Chair and explain the Council's proposals/policies.
- 3.2. A media release can also be issued by the Communications Team following a meeting. This should describe the decision taken and quote the Leader/Cabinet Member/Committee Chair, as appropriate. All media enquiries will be referred to the Leader of the Council or the appropriate Cabinet Member/Committee Chair. Where a report wishes to find out what was said by an individual Councillor during a debate, the report should be referred to the individual Councillor.
- 3.3. Cabinet and Scrutiny Meetings: The Communications Team will liaise with the relevant Cabinet Member/Scrutiny Chair, Scrutiny Support Officer or Head of Service to discuss potential communications issues contained in the papers for that meeting.
- 3.4. Where appropriate, the Communications Team will draft a media release in consultation with the Director and Cabinet Member, or Chair of Scrutiny (on behalf of the appropriate scrutiny panel). The release will be factual in content. It should quote the relevant Cabinet Member or Chair of the relevant scrutiny panel and explain the recommendations made in the report. Releases must clearly state that the recommendations are subject to the decision of the meeting. The appropriate Director and/or Cabinet Member or Scrutiny Chair must approve the press release prior to distribution.
- 3.5. The Communications Team will circulate the approved release to the media, to Party Group Leaders and to Group Offices.
- 3.6. Officers receiving enquiries from the media should notify the Communications Team, who will advise on the appropriate response.
- 3.7. Other meetings (Audit, Standards, Licensing and Regulatory, and Planning): On occasion, other decision making committees may wish to publicise a decision. If this is the case, the Chair of the meeting should

contact the Communications Team, in consultation with the relevant Director.

- 3.8. The Communications Team will draft the media release in consultation with the Director and the Chair; the release will be factual in content. It should quote the Chair and explain any recommendations or decisions. The appropriate Director and/or Chair must approve the media release prior to distribution.
- 3.9. On approval, the Communications Team will circulate to the media and send a copy to the Chair of the committee. A copy will also be sent to Party Group Leaders and to Group Offices.
- 3.10. Services and Events: When a media release is prepared to promote a service or event, this should be done in conjunction with the relevant Cabinet Member and Director or nominated officer. Party Group Leaders and Group Offices should also receive copies.
- 3.11. Ward Issues: Where a media release relating to a decision or an event that affects a particular ward is prepared, the Communications Team will issue the release in the normal way, but will also copy in Ward Members, so that they are kept informed and they have the opportunity to approach the media with their own comments.
- 3.12. Ceremonial Activities: The Mayor should be quoted in appropriate media releases and statements where the issue is civic or ceremonial and where his/her role as the Borough's first citizen is required. Examples of this would be media releases about civic receptions, hospitality functions, memorials, awards, presentations and tributes.
- 3.13. Member Champions: To be consulted on any press release relevant to their particular area of interest.

4. The Communications Team

- 4.1. The Communications Team is generally the first point of contact for journalists from the local, regional and national media.
- 4.2. The Communications Team provides Members, the Chief Executive, Directors and other senior managers with advice on communications matters that relate to the reputation of the Council and the publicising of its policies and services. The Communications Team has also produced guidance which will help officers to be more effective when working with the media.
- 4.3. The Communications Team will deal with simple factual queries in consultation with senior officers in Directorates, without reference to Directors or Cabinet Members.
- 4.4. The Communications Team will at no time be involved in developing party political material.

- 4.5. Where approaches are made to the Communications Team to issue statements on behalf of Party Groups or individual elected Members, the matter should be referred to the Chief Executive/Head of Democratic and Partnership Services. Any other officer asked to engage in this type of activity should immediately contact their line manager. Political assistants are not subject to these restrictions and are able to issue statements and releases on behalf of the Party Groups.
- 4.6. Where an appropriate spokesperson is needed, the Communications Team will seek to meet media deadlines but should always seek to respond within 24 hours of a first enquiry.
- 4.7. As a general principle, responses should be attributed to a named person. However, in some rare cases, such as where there are issues around the safety and welfare of staff, it may be appropriate that “a Council spokesperson” is the correct response.
- 4.8. Key aims of media management are to:
 - Provide clear and accurate information about the Council’s policies and services.
 - Represent the Council as transparent, accessible, honest and open.
 - Show that Calderdale is a listening Council by demonstrating our commitment to consulting and empowering the public.
 - Engage people in the democratic process so they feel more informed of our work.
 - Enhance the reputation of Calderdale Council by promoting and celebrating the successes and achievements of the Council and its partners.
 - Build the Council’s role as community leader and advocate for the community.
 - Defend the Council from unfounded criticism, challenging factual inaccuracies where published.
 - Improve the employee perception of the Council. We recognise our staff can be our best ambassadors.
 - Influence the content and tone of the reporting of Calderdale Council by taking a proactive approach to media management.
- 4.9. The Communications Team does this by:

- Promoting agreed corporate initiatives based on the Council's ambition and priorities through media releases, briefings, conferences and events.
- In liaison with the Chief Executive, Leader of the Council and Chairs where appropriate, promoting the role of Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny and other Council decision-making committees (i.e. Licensing and Regulatory, Planning and Audit).
- Promoting agreed service initiatives as requested by senior managers in liaison with Cabinet Members where appropriate.
- Evaluating media coverage, managing forward plans of activity and providing strategic communications advice to Directorates.

5. Council Employees

- 5.1. The following guidance relates to all officers of the Council with the exception of political assistants.
- 5.2. Effective communication is everyone's responsibility. Council officers working at all levels of the organisation are encouraged to get in touch with the Communications Team to alert them to a newsworthy or potentially damaging story (please see Section 6 of these protocols for hints and tips).
- 5.3. There are no hard and fast rules about the level of seniority of officers who can speak to the media. Generally, it is best to identify someone with the correct balance of authority and subject knowledge for that specific issue. In radio or TV interviews where a detailed knowledge of the subject material is crucial, appropriately qualified officers are encouraged to act as spokespersons. Directors and the Communications Team will advise.
- 5.4. Please be aware that there is no such thing as "off the record". Anything you say could be used and attributed to you or the Council.
- 5.5. In general, officers should not comment to the media on policy issues. There are exceptions to this where those officers are accredited employee representatives, e.g. Trade Union representatives.
- 5.6. Where the Council is being criticised by a politician, it is not normally appropriate to quote a Council officer in response or put forward an officer for a radio or TV interview.
- 5.7. The media may approach officers at any time. Staff should take note of the journalist's name, contact details, who they work for, the nature of the enquiry, and their deadline. Officers should not feel that they have to give a quote there and then. Instead, contact the Communications Team for advice.

- 5.8. It must be made clear that employees who are contacted by the media for comment on operational issues of the Council are not automatically forbidden from speaking to the media – they may be the expert in their particular field – but should first contact their line manager who will discuss with the Communications Team whether or not it is appropriate for them to comment.

6. The impact of social media

- 6.1 Social media allows the Council to communicate directly with residents, ensuring they are better informed about Council priorities and decisions and that they have access to information about services.

During emergency incidents such as flooding, use of social media is a critical part of the Council's response.

Platforms including Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Twitter, are increasingly becoming a source of information for journalists, for news stories, or to see what people think about particular issues.

Social media is a fast paced medium and messages can be shared rapidly across a population within hours. This means it is even more important that Officers and Members have a clear understanding of the procedures and processes.

When posting on the Council's social media accounts, Officers have a responsibility, given the role of the local authority as a trusted voice, to be considered in the language which they use, whilst at the same time making sure that the Council appears approachable, friendly and accessible. The tone of our communication should be appropriate to the circumstances, as well as accurate and factual.

All major social media campaigns pro-actively developed by the Communications team should be approved before they are launched.

Communications Officers will seek approval from the relevant Director / Assistant Director and Cabinet Member for the campaign messages at the beginning of the campaign, before they are posted on social media.

Posts may be on behalf of the Council or be shared messages which promote the campaigns of partner organisations.

Whilst every care will be taken to post accurately and in line with the Council's priorities there may be occasions where a post may lead to unintended consequences, for example where there is a perceived risk of harm to an individual as a result of a post. In these instances, a decision can be taken to remove the post, in consultation with the Director and relevant lead Cabinet Member.

- 6.2 Please check the communications area on the intranet for the latest information and advice on social media. Contact details below.

7 For further information

For more information about the work of the Communications Team please contact the Communications Team on 01422 393100 or e-mail pressoffice@calderdale.gov.uk