

## Appendix 22 – Principles and Protocols for dealing with the media

### 1. Introduction

Norfolk County Council is committed to effective communications so that residents are well informed about its services. The communications team works to promote and protect the Council's reputation, providing accurate and balanced media coverage of its work and activities.

The team operates within the terms and spirit of a legal framework which states that: -

*“A local authority shall not publish any material which in whole, or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party”.*

This covers *“any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public”.*

Publicity issued by local authorities must be lawful, cost effective, objective, even-handed, appropriate, have regard to equality and diversity and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity e.g. during a pre-election period.

### 2. Principles

Underpinning the work of the communications team are several fundamental principles.

**Members actively involved.** The content of all principal news releases should be shared and developed in draft stages with the lead Member for the relevant service (usually the Cabinet Member). All Members whose contact details are included in press releases should be alerted to releases before they are sent to the media so that they have time to digest the issue prior to any media enquiry. This alert will come by email. They should not hear first from the media. This applies to:

**Staff informed.** Media releases will be agreed with the principal officers and distributed to them prior to release. They will also be posted on the Council website on the day of publication.

**Honest.** The media team never knowingly misleads the media on a story or issue. Staff are in a long-term relationship with the local media and trust in our approach is critical.

**Accessible and timely.** Staff are polite but firm in dealings with the media, always ensuring contact numbers are accurate and returning calls efficiently to recognise competing pressures on deadlines. The timeliness of the response rate to media enquiries is recorded and a media officer is available to the media on a 24-hour basis, seven days a week.

**Fair.** The media team does not routinely favour one media source over another. Where appropriate, staff will identify the relative importance of media sources and be able to clearly justify any strategy that promotes one over another.

### **3. Protocol**

#### **a) Clearance of media releases, statements and interviews:**

Media activity on behalf of the Council – statements, press releases and interviews – should be cleared by the following: i) the communications team; ii) relevant Cabinet Member or, where applicable, in their absence, Deputy Cabinet Member; and iii) relevant Senior Officers.

This is to ensure “no surprises”, factual accuracy and consistency of Council messaging. (The only exceptions are the Museums and Libraries Services where releases that do not relate to policy or controversial matters may be released by the Services if they are simultaneously sent to the communications team). The Communications Team will use its best endeavours to supply press releases as early as possible to opposition spokespersons.

#### **b) Interviews by politicians:**

The communications team is available to broker interviews with and offer advice to Cabinet Members and the Leader (unless pre-election purdah restrictions are in place). This enables the team to brief interviewees, to improve their chances of success and to ensure that we can log the resultant coverage.

To assist this process, we would encourage politicians to let us know if they are approached by the media. However, the team recognises that politicians are free to make their own arrangements with the media, especially on party political matters.

If a senior politician is not available to be quoted or do an interview, a Senior Officer can take their place with consent from the Leader/Deputy Leader.

#### **c) Interviews by Officers:**

No officer should speak to the media about Council issues without the prior approval of the communications team. This is to ensure “no surprises”, factual accuracy and consistency of Council messaging. It also ensures that the officer can be briefed by the communications team, which reduces the risk of an unsuccessful interview. Ideally, officers who take part in interviews should have had media training.

As stated in 3.b - a Senior Officer can only be interviewed or quoted in a press release with consent from the Leader/Deputy Leader.

#### **d) Political Releases and Statements:**

Political groups are responsible for producing releases and statements relating to their group and party-political issues. Political Assistants will pass these to the communications team shortly after issue and the communications team will share

them with the relevant Cabinet Members, Group Leaders and Executive Directors. The communications team cannot be involved in this work, under the Government's Code of Practice.

All Councillors are entitled to comment on any subject in their electoral division but must be clear that this is their opinion and not the opinion necessarily of the council. Any Councillor who is unsure of this position can seek advice from the communications team. The communications team cannot always provide quotes for local Members on electoral divisional matters.

**e) Members quoted in Council press releases:**

Cabinet Members and/or the Leader should be quoted in Council releases relating to their service area, unless the Council is in a pre-election purdah period, in which case, officers should be quoted.

**f) Circulation to Local Members:**

Where a Press releases or statement relates to a specific part of the county it should be shared with the relevant local Members before they are issued to the media, for their information. The local Member's contact details will be included on the release and local Members will be invited to quote in press releases where a quote is appropriate. The local Member will sign off the quot and is responsible for responding in a timely way.

Other information, for example following a meeting, that directly affects local Members, will be circulated to them by the relevant departmental officer team.

**g) Circulation to Group Leaders:**

Group Leaders and Members whose contact details are included on press releases should be promptly alerted to press releases before they are issued to the media, for information. This alert will be by email.

**h) Publication of Press Releases on the Council's Website:**

The communications team will publish general press releases and statements – in other words, those issued to all media – on its website and may share them on social media. It will not publish statements provided to specific media outlets or resulting from specific media enquiries but will keep a record of them on its internal system.

**i) Publication of Committee, Cabinet and Full Council Agenda Papers:**

Papers are published, where possible, five clear days before a Council, Cabinet or Committee meeting takes place. The Council generally issues a press release about certain items on the agenda at the same time the agenda is published. Group Leaders will be given copies of such releases and the reports to which they relate in advance of publication, so they have time to digest the issue prior to any media enquiry. This alert will be by email.

**j) Motions and Questions:**

Motions and questions from individual Members shown on an agenda will not be publicised by the Council as a matter of fairness.

**k) Pre-election period:**

Pre-election restrictions stop the Council from launching and publicising any new initiatives. Publicity must be restricted during this period to “business as usual” activity that pre-dates the calling of the election. Any publicity, event or activity must not involve Members, including Members if they are standing for district elections.

**l) Press releases:**

The communications team will email press releases to all Members as a matter of course and to all relevant local, regional and national media contacts and will update our distribution list when we become aware of new outlets or journalists. We will also post releases online and, where appropriate Tweet links to them and post them on Facebook, if that is judged to be the best way to reach a particular audience.

**m) Council meetings:**

Council meetings are recorded as a matter of course and the media and public are free to film, record or photograph Council meetings provided they notify the Chair of the Council and do not disrupt proceedings. We encourage broadcasters, as a courtesy, to inform the communications team in advance of any meetings they intend to record or film, due to the size of their equipment, so that we can suggest which part of the room they can film from.

**n) Public Information Notices**

Public Information Notices will give information and always provide the relevant departmental contact number. They will be distributed to all appropriate local media. Relevant local Members will receive the notice by email where it relates to a divisional issue that may prompt constituent concern or query.

A copy will be emailed to the named officer contacts and appropriate Executive Director for information.

**o) News Statements**

News statements will be issued by the communications team where necessary and appropriate in response to a particular request for comment. They will be printed on news release paper, clearly headed ‘statement’ and issued on request.

#### **p) Attributing comments and quotes**

Quotes and comments will normally be attributed to a named person, Member or officer as appropriate, so that people know who to get in touch with, in the event of further interest. This means that the communications team actively request the media to attribute quotes as opposed to the 'a council spokesperson said' approach.

#### **q) Use of Embargoes**

Embargoes should only be used sparingly. 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.

#### **r) News Releases on Partnership issues or Projects**

Where we are either issuing or participating in the release of news on a partnership matter, the communications team will ensure that the Council's role or contribution is identified appropriately, and the release includes quotes from named Members or Officers and that the Council logo is included with others on the release paper.

#### **s) Communications Support for Schools**

Practical support for schools is offered in times of particular difficulties or success. This is a paid for service and can be in the form of general advice and guidance, media releases, fielding media calls or media briefings/news conferences.

In general terms:

The content of all media releases will be cleared in advance with the Head teacher and, if possible, the Chair of Governors.

Any media release will make it clear it is being issued on behalf of the school concerned and headed with the name of the school governing body as appropriate.

Relevant school contact names and numbers will be included on any release except where prior agreement has been reached that communications team staff should field all calls in the first instance.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for schools will be kept fully informed on media issues affecting schools in line with the 'no surprises' principle.

#### **t) Letters for Publication**

The communications team will, in consultation with the appropriate Cabinet Member, consider the need to reply to letters and articles about the Council or its

services that appear in the press and help draw up letters for publication, if appropriate.

In such cases, the Cabinet Member concerned will sign the letter or agree who else is best to respond having seen and approved the text prior to it being submitted. A copy of the letter will be sent to the Leader and Deputy Leader at the time it is submitted for publication. If the issue requiring a response is general in nature, the response may come from the Leader of the Council.

Where letters raise issues of a party-political nature, Group Leaders, aided by their Political Assistants, will consider and deal with any required response as considered necessary and appropriate.

#### **u) Dealing with Confidential Items**

The Council has some discretion over enquiries from journalists about the result of items discussed as an exempt item (“below the line”).

The communications team will always seek to give the outcome of an issue taken ‘below the line’ – unless there are over-riding reasons not to do so, such as the handling of personal and sensitive issues affecting staff or clients, or financial and commercial issues.

Members of the communications team should consider each case individually, striking a balance between what is reasonable for an Authority to release, while considering any effects on individual service users that publicity may bring.

In these circumstances, officers should liaise with the department concerned before deciding the best course of action to follow.

#### **v) Social Media**

The Council will use social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to promote its news, in addition to conventional media. The communications unit is responsible for the Council’s main channels and has the discretion to write and post material without clearance, provided it is in line with the social media protocol and the Council’s key messages.

Members and staff who use social media are reminded that reporters and the public can view their posts and use them in stories. Social media activity should not be used to damage the reputation of the Council.