

## **NHC MEDIA RELATIONS PROTOCOL NOVEMBER 2022**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Council provides a media relations service to ensure our work is effectively communicated to our residents and businesses and to ensure we can effectively manage our reputation.

Our principal commitments in providing a media relations service are to:

- Proactively promote the Council and its services in local, regional and national print, broadcast, online and social media
- Provide robust and timely response to media enquiries and letters to enhance the reputation of the Council; its policies, services and decisions
- Provide the media with information that is timely and accurate, consistent in quality and style, appropriate for the target audience and to meet their deadlines
- Respond quickly to any media inaccuracies in relation to services provided by the Council
- Maintain effective working relationships with journalists from all sectors of the media

### **2 PURPOSE OF THE PROTOCOL**

This protocol serves as the definitive media relations guide for NHC. Its aims are :

- To provide direction and guidance for council staff and Councillors on issues relating to the media.
- To provide the media with an indication of the service they should expect to receive from the Council

### **3 THE LEGAL CONTEXT FOR THE COUNCIL'S MEDIA WORK**

#### **3.1 Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity**

All council communications activity will have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The publicity code provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity. The code sets out seven key principles:

Publicity 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

The full code can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recommended-code-of-practice-for-local-authority-publicity>

### 3.2 The Council's Constitution

The Council's approach to dealing with media relations is set out in section eight of the Council's Protocol on Member/Officer relations, part of the Council's Constitution.

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-and-democracy/council-constitution>

The relevant paragraphs are highlighted below:

- *Contact with the media on issues related to the Council or to Council business is handled through, or with advice/support from, the Communications Unit.*
- *Any Member who approaches the media on any item involving or affecting the Council without first approaching or consulting the Council (through the Communications Unit) will be responsible for such action. Any Member who does so should make it clear that he/she is speaking on his/her own behalf and not representing or speaking for the Council.*
- *Members and officers should be mindful of the prohibition on the publication by the Council of any information intending to promote or canvass support for any political party or candidate for elections. In case of doubt, advice should first be obtained from the Monitoring Officer, who will have regard to Code of Practice on Local Government Communications.*

## 4. THE COUNCIL'S 'PRESS OFFICE'

### 4.1 How the press office works

The council runs a **centralised 'press office'** through the communications team.

- All **media enquiries and requests for interviews** related to council business should be directed, at least in the first instance, to the Communications team.
- All proactive **news releases** on behalf of the Council will be issued through the Communications team.
- All **media statements or letters to the editor** (outlining the Council's response to a particular issue) on behalf of the council will be issued through the Communications team.

All **media photocalls** will be arranged through the Communications team in conjunction with relevant service areas.

## **4.2 What the press office does**

### **4.2.1 Proactive press releases**

The Communications team is responsible for writing and issuing all proactive press releases. Press releases are an important way of promoting the work of the Council, its services and events to a wider audience.

Any departments which need to promote a new initiative or event and would like to issue a press release to the media, must contact the Communications team who will do this for them.

The Communications team will draft a press release with the information given to them by council officers and ensure that the release is approved by all relevant parties before being issued to the media. If a Council officer forwards a pre-drafted press release, the Communications team may re-write it to ensure it fits with the authority's corporate style and suits the requirements of the media.

All press releases will contain a quote from the Council's Executive Member who holds the relevant portfolio, or the relevant Deputy Executive Member where appropriate. Press releases detailing grants awarded by area committees will feature a quote from the relevant Area Committee Chair.

### **4.2.2 Media Enquiries**

The Communications team should be the first point of contact for all media enquiries.

The growth of digital journalism requires swift responses to media enquiries. Officers are asked to help support the Communications Team by providing information quickly to ensure deadlines are met. This ensures the Council does not lose its right to reply and has the opportunity to provide an accurate, balanced and positive account of its actions.

We always aim to deal with media enquiries within the reporter's deadline, however we do require 24 hours notice wherever possible to allow time for sign off procedures. If we are unable to meet a deadline, we will always let the journalist know and give an indication of when they can expect the response.

It would only be on rare occasions that the Council declines to comment on a relevant issue and this approach would be agreed with the relevant Executive Member and Service Director.

If the query is of a straightforward technical or factual nature, this can sometimes require a simple verbal response provided by a member of the Communications Team, acting under the advice of the relevant Council officer.

However, in the majority of cases, the Council will issue a written response to an enquiry. In this instance the Communications team will draft a response in conjunction with the relevant Council officer and Executive Member. The statement would normally come from the relevant Executive Member.

In some limited circumstances it may be appropriate to issue a statement from a Council spokesperson or a named officer rather than a Councillor; however this

approach would be agreed with the relevant Service Director and Councillor.

Journalists contacting the Communications team with enquiries that are deemed to be of a party political nature, will be advised to contact the Leader of the relevant party group for their response. Elected Members should make their own arrangements for issuing party political material to the media and ensure that the material does not use the Council's brand identity.

#### **4.3.3 Social media**

The use of social media is covered under a separate social media protocol.

#### **4.2.4 Requests for interviews**

The Council is sometimes asked to provide interviewees for radio and television interviews. The Communications team will gather as much information as possible from the journalist on what is required of the interview, such as whether it will be recorded or live, likely question areas, and whether anyone else is being interviewed.

It is the responsibility of the Communications team to discuss the proposed interview with the relevant Service Director, to establish the Council's position on the subject before seeking agreement from the relevant Executive Member to conduct the interview.

Once the Member has agreed to the interview, it is the Communications team's responsibility to ensure the Member is provided with the appropriate press release and background briefing before arranging a convenient time and place to conduct the interview.

#### **4.2.5 Letters**

If an officer or Councillor feels that an article or letter published in the media misrepresents the Council's position, or is factually incorrect, a letter of response may be issued through the Communications team. It is important to consider each letter individually to assess whether or not it is in the Council's best interest to respond and continue a dialogue through the letters page.

Where Councillors write letters in their own capacity i.e. not as Executive Members or in an official position and not via the Communications team, such letters should not be published using their official title 'Leader', 'Executive Member', 'Area Committee Chairman' etc.

#### **4.2.6 Press Briefings**

Press briefings have three main purposes:

- To help explain a complex issue that will aid the media understanding of the subject and lead to more accurate reporting
- To communicate an important story that will attract media attention
- To launch an initiative, service or event

Officers and lead Councillors should liaise with the Communications team on the

organisation of a press briefing, who should attend, topics to be covered and key messages. The Communications team will decide which media should attend and issue the relevant invitations.

#### **4.2.7 Events and Photo Opportunities**

Launch events and photo opportunities are a very effective way of publicising major new initiatives or events and to attract as much media interest as possible. A photo of the event will often maximise the coverage a press release receives. The Council's Protocol on organising a press event should be followed.

#### **4.2.8 FOI requests**

On occasion the press may submit FOI requests to gain information on a particular subject. FOI requests may take several weeks before a response is given. We would advise members of the press to contact the press office in the first instance before submitting an FOI to establish if we can deal with their query outside of the FOI process.

### **5 SPOKESPEOPLE**

Councillors should be quoted on all press releases and requests for statements from the media. For proactive press releases the Executive member and Deputy Executive Member with responsibility for the service area involved will be quoted, to give the Council's view or policy position on the subject. For reactive media enquiries, which often have a quick turnaround, only the Executive Member will be contacted (unless there is good reason to contact both).

If the relevant Executive Member / Deputy Executive Member is not available for comment, ordinarily the Leader of the Council can be contacted to give a quote in their absence.

If it is a purely operational matter it may be appropriate to quote a senior officer rather than a Councillor. This approach will be agreed by the relevant Service Director and the Communications team.

During pre-election period, the Council will always seek to quote senior officers (Managing Director or Service Directors) rather than councillors. Controversial press releases or those announcing new initiatives will not be issued during the period.

### **6 MONITORING AND RECORDING**

#### **6.1 Logging enquiries**

All media queries, press releases and statements that are sent to the media will be recorded on NHC's own media monitoring system. This information helps to ensure enquiries are dealt with and resulting coverage monitored.

#### **6.2 What the Media Says**

The Communications Team is responsible for producing 'What the Media Says' – a weekly publication containing press cuttings which either mention the Council or are directly relevant to the business of the Council. What the Media Says is distributed

electronically to Councillors and senior officers electronically and a copy is kept in the Communications office which can be viewed by all staff.

### **6.3 Copying of press articles**

The authorisation for the copying of press articles from any publication is governed by the Newspaper Licensing Agency. The Council has to pay an annual subscription to this agency to allow us to photocopy, scan and distribute press cuttings to a certain number of councillors and officers.

## **7 MEDIA TRAINING**

The Communications Manager will arrange regular media training for Executive members. The team are always on hand however to provide advice and guidance to councillors on media issues.

## **8 COMMUNICATIONS TEAM CONTACTS**

For assistance, advice and guidance during office hours contact:

Christine Crofts, Communications Manager 01462 474544  
Sarah Jenkinson, Senior Communications Officer, 01462 474210  
Anna Cotton, Communications Officer 01462 474403

Out of office hours if urgent contact:

Christine Crofts, Communications Manager, 07531 112169.