



# **THE NEWCASTLE CHARTER**

## **Part 5.4J – Communication Protocol**

## **Notes: -**

**This constitutes a local protocol and is not part of the statutory code of conduct for members under the Local Government Act 2000.**

It provides guidance on how members and officers should deal with the media.

## **Authorisation**

This was originally approved by City Council on 7 April 2004.

## NEWCASTLE CITY COUNCIL

### COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

- a) The Local Government Act 1986 enables the Secretary of State to issue, revise or withdraw a code of recommended practice as regards the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity and such other related matters as he thinks appropriate. Local authorities must have regard to the provisions of any such code in coming to any decision on publicity.
- b) In August 1988 the Secretary of State issued "The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity". In April 2001 that Code was revised to reflect changes in Council constitutions and the advent of referendums and petitions. Amongst other changes the section on "Publicity about individual members of an authority" was re-written and the section on elections has been expanded to include referendums and petitions.
- c) The old code made it clear that using public funds to publicise individual Councillors was not allowed. It did however acknowledge that it may be appropriate to publicise the views of individual members when they were representing the Council as a whole e.g. when a committee chair launches a new policy which has been approved by the Council as a whole.
- d) The new code provides that publicity about individual Councillors may include their contact details, the positions they hold in the Council and their responsibilities. It also permits publicity about individual Councillors proposals, decisions and recommendations provided:-
  - *it is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council*
  - *the publicity is objective and explanatory i.e. it sticks to the facts, there is no personalisation of the issues and personal image making is avoided*
  - *it is not done in party political terms*
- e) The Local Government Association recommends local authorities to adopt a local communications protocol which takes account of the revised code.

#### 2. AIM

- a) The aim of this protocol is to ensure that the Council makes the best use of its communications resources to support open, accessible and responsive government whilst acknowledging that Council resources may not be used for party political purposes.
- b) It clearly sets out the respective roles of members and officers in dealing with the media. The protocol applies to all officers and to Councillors where the section refers to Councillors specifically.

#### 3. COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING UNIT

- a) Responsibility for media enquiries and news releases affecting the Council lies with the Council's Head of Communications and Marketing.
- b) The Communications and Marketing Unit is part of the Chief Executive's Directorate.

- c) The Council's press office is located within the Unit and is the main point of contact for responding to media enquiries and for issuing news releases.

#### **4. PERMITTED COMMUNICATION**

The Council's communication resources (including press releases, Citylife and the website) may be used to:

- a) raise awareness of and promote Council policies and services
- b) support local democracy
- c) support effective dialogue between the Council and its communities
- d) support the Council's role as a community leader
- e) promote the Council's role within a partnership
- f) meet legal requirements
- g) promote public safety messages and keep people informed during a civil emergency

#### **5. POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS**

- a) The Council's communication resources may not be used to affect or be designed to affect public support for a political party or to provide a political advantage to a Councillor
- b) This is endorsed by the Council's Member-Officer Protocol (Part 5.4A of the Newcastle Charter) which provides that:-
  - i) publicity material and the issuing of press releases by officers should not be party political
  - ii) official news releases and official press statements should only be sent out through the press office in the Communications and Marketing Unit
  - iii) any interviews to be given by a member (where he or she is to appear as a Council spokesperson) should be managed by the press office in the Communications and Marketing Unit
- c) Political communications are a matter for Councillors and their parties to resource and implement.

#### **6. MEDIA ENQUIRIES AND PRESS RELEASES**

- a) All media enquiries must be referred to the press office for a response unless alternative arrangements have been made.
- b) Press releases which refer to policy issues will be agreed with and include relevant quotes from the lead Councillor on that issue.
- c) All press releases will be placed on the Council's website and intranet on the day of release.

## 7. QUOTING APPROPRIATE COUNCILLORS

- a) Appropriate Councillors will be contacted for information about and potential input into the handling of media enquiries which have policy implications. Where the appropriate Councillor is not available and the matter is urgent or has significant implications for policy or the reputation of the Council, the Leader of the Council will be contacted.
- b) The press office will help with interview arrangements and in consultation with directors or other relevant directorate staff arrange briefings for the Councillor.

## 8. APPROPRIATE COUNCILLORS

- a) The revised code provides that public resources should not be used for the personalisation of issues, personal image making or for party political purposes. In view of the fact that communications resources may not be used to provide a political advantage to an individual Councillor particular care is necessary when issuing press releases quoting ward Councillors
- b) To ensure compliance with the revised code press releases on ward matters should be on matters which have been agreed by a ward committee. To ensure that the release includes clear and accessible information for the media and the public the release should include a quote from **one** Councillor agreed by the ward committee as the lead spokesperson.

**Note:-** *this policy covers the use of public resources for publicity produced by Newcastle City Council it does not prevent any Councillor from producing their own or party political publicity on ward or other matters concerning the Council.*

- c) the resources of the press office may also be used to publicise the views of an individual Councillor when he or she is representing the Council as a whole for example when
  - i) the First Citizen (Lord Mayor) speaks on matters relevant to this non-political role
  - ii) members of the Executive or political administration (Leader and Executive members) speak on executive policy matters
  - iii) the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committees speaks on behalf of the relevant committee subject to the Chair informing the relevant executive Councillor.
  - iv) the Chair of the Newcastle Partnership speaks on behalf of the partnership on a matter agreed by the partnership and having consulted with the Leader of the City Council.
  - v) the Chair of a decision making committee whose quasi-legal status requires it to be separate from the Executive speaks on behalf of the committee and on matters which require a comment separate from the Executive subject to the Chair consulting with the relevant Executive member.
  - vi) the Chair of a board or working group speaks on behalf of the board or working group on a matter agreed by the board or working group subject to the chair agreeing with the relevant Executive member
  - vii) the Chair of independent committees speak on behalf of the committee on a matter agreed by the committee.

- viii) the Chair of Standards Committee speaks on behalf of the committee on a matter agreed by the committee.

**Note:-** references to Chair also includes Vice-Chair. The Vice-Chair will only be contacted when the Chair is unavailable.

- ix) A ward committee representative where the members of the committee agree on a collective spokesperson and that spokesperson is quoted on a ward matter on behalf of the ward.

## **9. SENIOR OFFICERS**

- a) Relevant senior officers may speak to the media on behalf of the Council to clarify factual information and to explain why decisions have been made. They should avoid being drawn into politically controversial discussions. They should seek advice from the press office and keep the press office informed.
- b) Senior officers will normally consult with the relevant executive member before providing an interview.
- c) Officers will keep Councillors informed of significant issues which affect their policy area or ward including changes to service delivery and consultation with residents in their area.

## **10. COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES AND STANDARDS**

- a) The Council's Communication and Marketing Strategy contains the following principles:-
  - i) Support honest, open, two-way communication
  - ii) Use correct corporate identity and style
  - iii) All publicity produced in accessible format and style
  - iv) A proactive and planned approach to media handling, advertising, marketing and wider communication
  - v) Provide effective communication and marketing support
  - vi) Promote the Council's vision and policies
  - vii) Set standards on communicating with hard to reach groups
  - viii) Support effective partnership working through developing communication strategies for joint projects
- b) A full copy of the strategy can be found on the Council's website.
- c) These principles will be observed as if they were part of this Protocol.

## **11. PLANNING FOR FUTURE EVENTS**

- a) It is the responsibility of the Communications and Marketing Unit to advise on how to achieve positive, external communications on behalf of the Council. They will liaise closely with the Leader of the Council, Executive members and members of the Council's Strategic Leadership Team in carrying out this role.

- b) The Communications and Marketing Unit maintain a *future events database* to ensure effective communication planning. It is the responsibility of officers organising any event, project, visit or meeting which requires publicity to inform appropriate Councillors. Councillors will be informed by nominated officers within directorates. These could include directors, information or marketing officers. Those contact people within directorates will be publicised within individual directorates and directorates will ensure that Members Services and the Communication and Marketing Team are supplied with up to date information on directorate contacts. The nominated officer must also inform the Communications and Marketing Team in order that the event can be included in the future events database. Care should be taken to avoid events clashing and the communications and marketing Team will advise officers and members of potential clashes so that where possible they can be avoided.

## 12. POLICY FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

- a) The Council's policy is to be:-
  - i) open
  - ii) transparent
  - iii) honest
  - iv) pro-active and assertive
  - v) helpful to the media in facilitating photograph opportunities, interviews and other reasonable requests
- b) In accordance with this policy the press office will:-
  - i) promote the reputation of the organisation
  - ii) respond quickly and effectively to media enquiries
  - iii) respect the confidential nature of information which is retained by the Council on individual cases or other matters which are officially specified as confidential

## 13. POSITIVE PUBLICITY

- a) Positive media coverage supports the reputation of the Council.
- b) The Council values its employees and the contribution they make to the day to day provision of its services. Positive media coverage improves staff morale by publicly recognising the work and commitment of individual employees and groups of staff. Directorates and schools are therefore encouraged to promote their activities through the media and Council publications by informing the Communications and Marketing Unit of newsworthy achievements and developments.
- c) Media coverage can be positive, even where negative issues are discussed, when representatives of the Council are seen as:-
  - i) representing the organisation
  - ii) reflecting the way the Council wants to operate and taking ownership of the issue rather than distancing themselves
  - iii) enthusiastic about contributing to the discussion
  - iv) saying as much as they are able to

- v) giving access to and insight into the difficulties and complexities of public service
- vi) being transparent and honest

#### **14. NEGATIVE PUBLICITY**

- a) Issues which have negative implications for the reputation of the Council will be dealt with in accordance with the negative publicity strategy set out below.
- b) If an issue comes to the attention of any officer which has major negative implications for the reputation of the Council it is the responsibility of those officers to alert the Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive, the relevant Director and the Communications and Marketing Unit.
- c) They or their representatives will meet immediately in order to devise a strategy for dealing with the issue (if not already in place) and agree a consistent response which can be used for external and internal audiences.
- d) When preparing a response the following strategy will be followed:-
  - i) where the Council has made a substantial mistake it will explain what went wrong and what it is doing to put it right. It will not be defensive but take the attitude that it can learn from its mistakes
  - ii) where the media has made a substantial mistake in reporting the activities of the Council it will quickly and assertively explain the mistake to the media and seek a right of reply

#### **15. TIMING OF PUBLICITY**

- a) The Council will make every effort to ensure that officers and members are informed before they find out about significant issues through the media.
- b) In an increasingly fast and pervasive communications environment this will not always be possible. When holding media briefings or issuing news releases the press office will use relevant electronic methods including internet, intranet and e-mail to inform Councillors and staff. The relevant lead Councillors will be contacted via the telephone or face to face, but if they are not available, they will be contacted via e-mail.

#### **16. WARD COMMUNICATION**

- a) Council resources may be used to promote ward and neighbourhood communications. Care should however be taken to ensure that the content of newsletters meets the communication objectives set out in paragraph 4 and where Councillors are quoted, there is overall balance according to representation by individual Councillors and party groups within the ward or wards.
- b) In order to ensure that ward communication meets the requirements of the Council's Communication Protocol, the Head of Communications and Marketing will have editorial control and shall have regard to any policy or practical arrangements agreed by Neighbourhood Committee.
- c) **Ward communication must not be distributed between the notice of an election and the election itself.**

## **17. PARTNERSHIP COMMUNICATION**

The Council will work with partner organisations to ensure that we plan, co-ordinate and achieve best value in promoting partnership policies and services.

## **18. HARD TO REACH GROUPS**

The Council will make use of specialist media to communicate with a wide range of hard to reach groups. These groups will be involved in developing appropriate communications through the Council's work to achieve the Equality Standard as set out in the Corporate Equality Plan.

## **19. ELECTION PERIOD**

- a) Between the notice of an election and the election itself communication resources will not be used for proactive publicity of candidates and other politicians involved in the election. In circumstances where Councillors hold key political or civic positions and are involved in the election they will be able to respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided that answers are factual and not party political.
- b) The Head of Corporate Law, Head of Democratic Services and Head of Communications and Marketing will ensure that annual guidance is provided as the Council approaches this sensitive period by producing an Executive report which reminds members and officers of the legal requirements.

## **20. CONTENT AND STYLE**

- a) The Council will use Plain English. It will handle publicity about controversial issues with care. Publicity describing the Council's policies and services will be factual and objective. Promotional publicity is appropriate in some circumstances, for example, to attract investment or visitors to Newcastle.
- b) When asked to comment on policies of other organisations including central Government, other local authorities and agencies, the Council will ensure that the response is objective, accurate and balanced.

## **21. MEDIA TRAINING AND AWARENESS OF THE PROTOCOL**

The Head of Communications and Marketing supported by managers within the unit will provide media training and communication protocol training and support for members and officers.

## **22. BEST VALUE**

- a) The Communications and Marketing Unit will meet the statutory best value requirements.
- b) Wherever possible the most effective communication channels available to the Council as a whole will be used. Cost efficient and effective communication channels include the Council's own publication Citylife and this will be used in a planned and targeted way to support regular communication with residents. The Council will also use a wide range of other effective methods available to it including the internet, intranet, e-mail, and the media.

- c) In planning communication strategies and methods, the Council will ensure that it takes every opportunity to support electronic government targets.
- d) The Council's electronic communication resources including internet, intranet and e mail system are also covered by this communication protocol.