

Peterborough City Council

Media and Pre-Election Publicity Protocol

This document provides guidance on best practice in relation to Peterborough City Council's publicity and media relations activity. It also covers the protocols to be followed by members and officers in the run up to an election.

It should be read by members and officers involved in publicising the Council, in conjunction with the more detailed media guide available from the Communications Team.

The role of councillors in media relations activity is covered in some detail. General advice for officers is also included, but more detailed guidance is available from the media guide.

The protocol is to be reviewed after one year of operation.

1. INTRODUCTION

These protocols provide guidance on best practice in relation to Peterborough City Council's publicity and media relations activity. 'Publicity' covers any communications, written or verbal, issued to the public at large or to a section of the public, including publications, conferences, advertising, marketing, consultation, community campaigning, exhibitions, public meetings and the council web site.

Local authorities are accountable to their communities, and the protocols are based on the council's belief that the public has the right to know what the council is doing, the results of its actions and its policies and plans.

The key objectives and methods for the council's publicity are stated in the council's communications strategy.

2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The council's publicity activity operates within the terms and spirit of a legal framework set out within the Local Government Act (1986, 1988 and 2000) and the Code of Recommended Practice in Local Authority Publicity (1998 and 2001).

In particular, the following aspects of the legislation and code should be noted:

- Any publicity describing the council's policies and aims should be objective, informative and accurate - concentrating on facts or explanations or both. It should not be designed to persuade people to hold a particular view. However, controversial issues should still be tackled, and should not be oversimplified.
- A local authority must not publish, or assist others to publish, any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party. Personalisation of issues and personal image-making should be avoided.
- Publicity should not undermine generally accepted moral standards
- Information should be made available to all those who want or need it, taking particular care with vulnerable sections of the community

These principles underpin the council's approach to publicity at all times. The framework also applies to any other organisation's publicity available to the public in council premises.

3. SCOPE OF THESE PROTOCOLS

This document refers to publicity generated by or through the City Council, or labelled as Peterborough City Council's view or position.

It does not cover any issues raised directly by councillors with the media, or by the media with members. Members are, however, advised to ensure that the principles enshrined in these protocols are not undermined by direct contact.

Organisations to which the council has given grant aid are usually required to publicise that fact. When undertaking such publicity, the organisation should adhere to these guidelines.

4. APPROACH

In carrying out the provisions of these protocols, the approach should be to accommodate requests unless there is a clear, documented reason not to do so.

Any disagreement about the application of the protocols, or conflict arising from them, will be raised with the Chief Executive who will discuss the matter with the Leader of the Council in order to seek resolution.

5. GENERAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

- Proactive media relations work to promote the council is carried out by the Communications Division in liaison with relevant officers and service departments and, where appropriate, the Leader of the Council, Deputy Leader, Cabinet members and/or Committee Chairmen. This proactive activity includes the promotion of policies, future plans, services, initiatives, events, public consultations and the results of council actions.
- In order to maximise councillors' opportunity to provide comment to the media, the Communications Division will provide all local media contacts with a list of city councillors and their contact details, political affiliation, the ward they represent and any positions they hold within the council. A list is also available on the council's website, www.peterborough.gov.uk
- Councillors may contact the media directly, and respond to media enquiries. If the views expressed are personal ones rather than those of the council, councillors should make every effort to ensure that this is made clear to the media.
- If members are asked to comment on an issue with which they are unfamiliar, they are not obliged to provide comment straight away 'on the hoof'. It is recommended that they contact the Communications Team for advice, and for clarification of the position, before proceeding.
- No member or officer will be quoted in a news release without their prior approval and will receive a copy of the release for confirmation.
- The Leader of the Council will receive all news releases for information prior to issue.
- All news releases are posted on the council's website, www.peterborough.gov.uk and hard copies are available from the Communications Division.

6. COUNCILLORS WITH DESIGNATED RESPONSIBILITIES

The council may publicise the views and contact details of councillors when they (councillors) are speaking on behalf of the council as part of their designated responsibilities, for example:

- councillors representing the council, a council division, an executive function, an agreed overview and scrutiny committee position or a jointly agreed overview and scrutiny committee group representatives' position; or
- lead councillors appointed by the council to an area or partnership committee, inter-agency, regional or national body.

However, it will not always be appropriate, or necessary, to include quotes from members, e.g. for minor operational issues or in the period before an election (see Section 8).

Full media protocols for Cabinet, overview and scrutiny committees, regulatory committees and executive decision notices are attached at Appendix 1.

7. COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AT LOCAL LEVEL

The work of local councillors is an important contributor to the council's community leadership role. Where the council is publicising a local issue, the following protocols will be followed:

- The relevant lead officer will notify councillors prior to the issue of a news release pertaining to their ward and will make every effort to inform them of incoming media enquiries relating to major issues in their ward.
- Lead officers, in consultation with the Communications Division, will invite councillors to attend photocalls that relate to issues/activities within their ward. Whilst every effort will be made to arrange photocalls at mutually convenient times, media schedules mean that the dates and times of these photocalls cannot be organised primarily around councillors' availability.
- Full consideration will be given to the inclusion of quotes from councillors in news releases pertaining to their ward, alongside a quote from a relevant council officer.
- Councillors have the option for their name, political affiliation and contact details to be included in the 'notes to editors' on news releases pertaining to their ward. Ward councillors' details are also available from the council's website, www.peterborough.gov.uk
- The council or the media may approach members to provide comment where a major event or incident affects the community they serve and requires immediate action. If councillors are approached directly by the media they are not obliged to provide comment 'on the hoof'. As stated in Section 5 above, it is recommended that they contact the Communications Team for advice, and for clarification of the position, before providing comment.

In addition, individual councillors may be quoted in the following circumstances:

- In council news releases, where they have designated responsibilities (see Section 6).
- Where they are successful in securing council, executive or overview and scrutiny committee support for an issue in the public interest, e.g. adoption of a new policy, agreement to fund or maintain a new service or support for a policy proposal.
- Where they hold a personal (i.e. non-council) position and are providing an expert view on an issue in this capacity.

8. POLITICAL AND GROUP STATEMENTS

- Political groups are responsible for issuing their own personal or group statements, and media releases. Councillors making such statements should make every effort to ensure their views are not construed as official council statements. Such news releases must be paid for by the member or party concerned.
- Any requests for political comments will be referred to the appropriate group leader or group representative.

9. MEDIA RELATIONS SUPPORT FOR MEMBERS

Councillors are encouraged to promote their work and to contact the Communications Team for advice. However, the Team will only initiate media activity that falls within the legal framework and scope outlined in Sections 2 and 3 above.

Where the Communications Team is unable actively to initiate media activity for councillors, the following support is available from the Team to enable members to develop their own media opportunities:

- Media training
- A media guide providing advice on how to develop a story for the media
- Up-to-date contact details for the local media
- Ad-hoc advice on how to handle the media

In addition, administrative support (e.g. typing news releases) is available from the Member Services Unit for publicity that falls within the framework outlined in Section 2 above.

10. ELECTIONS – PUBLICITY PROTOCOLS

From the date of notice of an election, up to and including election day, the council is required by law to observe the national code of conduct provision that it will not publicise:

- controversial issues; or
- a view or policy in a way that identifies it with one member or group of members.

Further, from one month before an election, the council has determined that the following protocols must be observed:

10.1 Dealing with Requests from Councillors, Candidates and MPs

- Officers will be even-handed and as helpful as possible to all candidates (including MPs) standing for election and must not act in a manner likely to increase the support of one party over another.
- Requests for action from election candidates should be treated on strict merit in accordance with current policy. Any proposal to give priority action to any matter arising from election campaigning should be cleared at director level.
- Officers should take particular care when accepting requests for action to be taken in areas of council activity that are particularly sensitive, or where activity has been deferred pending the outcome of the election.
- Officers will not provide any information that is not available to the general public unless a councillor can demonstrate a 'need to know' the information in accordance with the procedural rules in the council's constitution. Any information that is made

available to an MP must be provided to all the Parliamentary candidates for that constituency.

- Members and MPs must not seek to obtain privileges or publicity from the council for any candidates, including themselves, in relation to obtaining confidential information, visiting council establishments, use of council premises and use of officers' time.

Appendix 2 shows in a flow-chart how these protocols would apply to different situations.

10.2 Publicity – General Provisions

- Publicity must not deal with controversial issues or appear to support a point of view in a way that is identifiable as the view of one political party or another.
- There must be no proactive publicity promoting particular candidates or other politicians involved directly in the election.
- Officers should not take part in any publicity that links them with any political party or candidate, including requests from members for officers to speak in their ward.
- It is unlawful for the council to incur any expense with a view to promoting the election of a candidate, including producing publicity material such as circulars, publications or advertisements; presenting the candidate or their views; or disparaging another candidate.

10.3 Media relations

In respect of major incidents or emergencies outside the council's control, where the community requires clear leadership from the council, it may be appropriate for the council to arrange for members in key positions to comment.

When dealing with the media, officers should take particular care to 'stick to the facts' and not be drawn to comment on contentious/controversial issues or on promised new policies or initiatives. They should not be seen to take any particular side in an area of contention or political dispute.

The council's Communications Team can assist in all dealings with the media in the run-up to an election. This includes advice on:

- briefing journalists;
- arranging interviews and photo opportunities with staff and residents; and
- escorting press and camera crews around buildings.

10.4 Events and Speaking Opportunities

Publicity events arranged during this period should not as a general rule involve members. However, elected member leadership is important at some key events, and in such cases the council must seek the involvement of representatives from all political parties to ensure an even-handed approach.

Individual candidates should not be invited to council functions as speakers or guests unless all other relevant candidates are offered a similar opportunity. Similarly, any public or private debate/talk organised through a school or other council premises should only be held if all political parties are given the opportunity to take part.

Officers should not accept invitations from individual members or candidates to speak within their ward.

10.5 Posters and Election Material

All election material must include the name and address of the printer and publisher. Any concerns about inappropriate electoral material are a matter for the National Electoral Commission.

Posters and election material must not be displayed in any city council office or establishment, including council-owned community centres, or on cars used for official business by council employees or which are parked in a council car park.

Similarly, no such material should be displayed by a contractor engaged on council business. Officers should proactively monitor this.

10.6 Visits and tours

Visits may be arranged for councillors and candidates to residential and other establishments in their area, but it is important that a fair and consistent approach be taken. It is recommended that heads of establishment should allow only one visit by each local councillor/candidate in the run-up to the election, and that visits are pre-planned to minimise disruption.

Tours should be escorted by a responsible member of staff.

When representing their national political party, MPs holding government office or designated as Shadow or other party spokesmen may visit any council establishment provided prior approval is given by the Chief Executive or the service director. As normal, prior notification of any such visit must be given to the council's political Group Leaders.

10.7 Use of Photographs

General photographs of the outside of council premises may be used for publicity, so long as they do not exploit or indicate the views of the city council or any of the students, residents or staff working on those premises.

Photographs of staff, students or other council clients may only be used if prior consent has been obtained from the head of establishment.

10.8 Use of Premises

Between the notice of election and the day before polling day, candidates are legally entitled to hold election meetings at any reasonable time in publicly funded venues.

The following guidelines apply:

- No charge will be made for room hire, but candidates may be asked to cover caretaking costs (preparing/restoring the room, heating, lighting, cleaning, catering etc.) and they will be asked to pay for the repair of any damage caused whilst they are using the room.
- Applicable venues include publicly funded schools and any public room, hall, gallery or sports hall that is commonly let for public meetings. Candidates may not use premises in an adjoining ward or constituency if there is a suitable room within their own ward/constituency that is reasonably accessible.
- Meetings must be held at a reasonable time, i.e. one that does not interfere with the usual use of the room (e.g. as a classroom) or with prior bookings.
- The council cannot refuse to allow a candidate to use a room on the grounds of its disapproval of the candidate's views.
- The council (as local education authority) must prepare and keep revised lists of rooms in schools (and elsewhere) that candidates may use. This should include details of the person to whom applications to use the rooms should be made. These lists should be forward to the Electoral Registration Officer for inspection by candidates or their agents at reasonable hours.
- School premises must be used for public meetings only (i.e. meetings that are open to the general public and not limited to ticket holders) and not as committee rooms to promote or procure the election of a candidate.

Control at public meetings:

Under common law, any persons causing a disturbance may be ejected, if necessary, using reasonable force. The Police have power to control public assemblies of 20 or more persons and they should be advised as early as possible of any public meetings that are likely to attract a substantial number of people. Their advice should be taken.

Media Protocols for Council, Cabinet and Committee Meetings and Executive Decision Notices

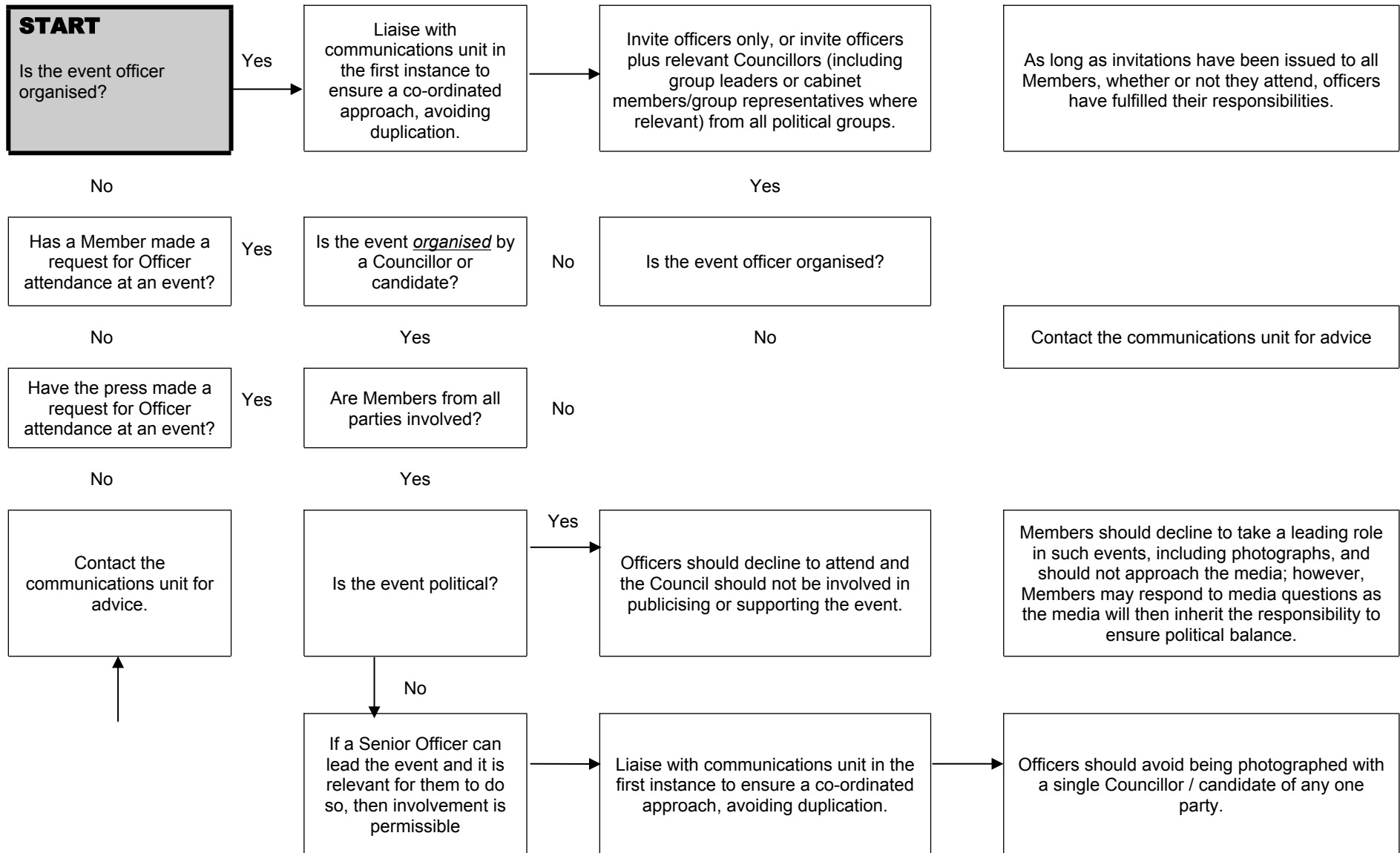
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Committee/Event	News Releases	Media interviews before meetings ⁽¹⁾	Media interviews after meetings ⁽¹⁾	Notes
Cabinet Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Communications Team will look to issue news releases on key issues ahead of Cabinet meetings, along with Cabinet papers. News release subjects will be agreed with the Cabinet member or Leader of the Council and relevant officers. News releases will quote the Leader of the Council or lead cabinet member 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews may be given by the Leader of the Council or lead cabinet member on policy, budget and service issues ⁽²⁾ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews may be given by the Leader of the Council or lead cabinet member on policy, budget and service issues ⁽²⁾ Officers may give interviews on service issues 	On major issues, arrangements will be made for the media to be briefed by the Leader of the Council, Deputy Leader or lead cabinet members as appropriate, along with the relevant service director.
Overview and Scrutiny Committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An overview and scrutiny committee can initiate a news release at any time so long as it represents the committee's view. It must be consistent with the intent of scrutiny, i.e. to achieve a culture of openness, co-operation and continuous improvement throughout the council. If issues arise between meetings, a committee's group representatives may issue a joint release provided they are all in agreement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The chairman of the relevant scrutiny committee will conduct all media interviews on overview and scrutiny matters, unless the chairman decides otherwise. In his/her absence, the vice chairman may be asked to substitute, or a group representative may substitute if all of the other group representatives so agree. 		Where publicity relating to an overview and scrutiny committee brings into question a matter of council policy, the Communications Team will advise the relevant director, the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council.
Regulatory Committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> News releases are not generally issued unless there is an issue of major significance to the community. Releases will only be issued following discussion with the committee chairman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Officers may give interviews on service issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Committee chairmen or vice-chairmen may give interviews on policy and service issues, to confirm decisions made ⁽²⁾ 	News releases are not normally issued prior to planning meetings. In order to avoid pre-empting decisions, if a release is deemed necessary it will be purely factual and contain no quotes.
Executive Decision Notices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> News releases are issued on major issues following discussions with the appropriate cabinet member and/or council director. News releases will quote the appropriate cabinet member 	Media interviews on executive decision notices will be given by the responsible cabinet member ⁽²⁾		All Executive Decision Notices are posted on the council's website.

(1) Individual committee members have the right to express their views to the media, even if it is not the majority view of the committee. Councillors making such statements should, however, make every effort to ensure their views are not construed as official council comments.

(2) If the nominated members are not available to speak to the media (e.g. short notice interviews), an appropriate officer will speak to the media, providing factual information only.

Pre-Election Protocol for Councillor and Officer Involvement and Attendance at Publicity Events



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