

North Tyneside Council Corporate Communications Guidelines

1. Introduction

a) Every local authority must take account of national legislation to make sure public money is used appropriately on publicity and its communications meets legal requirements.

b). The Local Government Act 1986 introduced legislation to prevent the use of public money being spent on party politics. Section 2 of the Act states: "A local authority shall not publish material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party."

c) Section 4 of the same Act states that local authorities shall have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity when coming to any decisions on publicity.

d) A new Code of Recommended Practice for Local Government publicity was published on March 31 2011 by the government and introduces some changes for North Tyneside Council to take into account. An explanatory memorandum published by the Department for Communities and Local Government alongside the new code confirms that communication - including publicity aspects of communications - is an essential function for local government to inform and engage with its residents and stakeholders:

"For a community to be a healthy democracy local understanding of the operation of the democratic process is important and effective communications is key to developing that understanding. Local authority publicity is important to transparency and localism, as the public need to know what their local authority is doing if they are to hold it to account" (Explanatory Memorandum published by CLG alongside the Publicity Code, March 2011)

e) The new principles for communications to guide local government publicity were introduced as part of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. These require that local government publicity should:

- i) Be lawful
- ii) Be cost-effective
- iii) Be objective
- iv) Be even-handed
- vi) Be appropriate
- vii) Have regard to equality and diversity
- viii) Be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

f) These Corporate Communications Guidelines explain how the Council will deliver its Protocol on Press, Publicity and Publications in the North Tyneside Council Constitution.

2. Aim

- a) The aim of the protocol is to ensure that North Tyneside Council makes the best use of its communications resources to support open, accessible and responsible government, whilst acknowledging the Council resources may not be used for party political purposes.
- b) It clearly sets out how the requirements will be delivered in practice by the Council in all aspects of its communications. The guidelines apply to all Council officers and to councillors where the section refers to councillors specifically.

3. Corporate Communications Service

- a) The Corporate Communications function is responsible for leading and delivering the corporate communications approach. This involves co-ordinating and delivering a range of different services for the council as a whole, including media management, communication planning, internal communications, corporate publications, marketing, graphic design, online communications (including web development and social media) and reprographics.
- b) This includes what is often referred to as the 'press office' – the central point of contact for receiving and responding to media inquiries and for issuing news releases.

4. Permitted Communications

- a) The Local Government Act 1972 (Section 142) empowers local authorities for the "provision of information relating to matters affecting local government"
- b) The Council's communication resources (including press releases, its corporate publications and website) may be used to:
- Raise awareness of and promote Council policies and services
 - Support local democracy and understanding of the democratic process
 - Support effective dialogue between the Council and its communities
 - Support the Council's role as a community leader
 - Promote the Council's role within a partnership
 - Meet legal requirements
 - Promote public safety messages and keep people informed during a civil emergency.
 - Facilitate and promote communities in action
 - Influence the attitudes of local behaviour in relation to health, safety, crime prevention, race relations, equality and diversity and community issues.
 - Support transparency

5. Political Communications

- a) The Council's resources may not be used to affect or be designed to affect the public support for a political party or to provide a political advantage to a councillor.

b) Political communications are a matter for councillors and their political parties to resource and implement.

c) Where the Council's publicity addresses matters of political controversy it will seek to present the different positions in relation to the issue a fair and objective manner, focused on factual information.

6. Elected members and publicity

a) These guidelines support the Code of Conduct for Members.

b) The Council's communications may include information from councillors and the Elected Mayor, including their views and details about projects they have contributed to delivering.

c) In practice, this will generally be restricted to members with special responsibility, eg Elected Mayor, Chairman, Cabinet members, Chairs of Committees. However, the government guidance also accepts it is appropriate to consider including members who have been the 'face' of a particular local campaign e.g. as part of the scrutiny role.

d) The decision on who should be included in Council communications will be considered on an individual basis by the Corporate Communications team, in collaboration, with Heads of Service/Directors and the Chief Executive as appropriate. It will take account of how best the Council can inform, explain and justify its actions and decisions to its residents and stakeholders.

e) However, in all instances publicity material must not seek to affect public political support for an individual member or political party.

f) Members are able to do their own publicity and this can involve speaking directly to the media. It is the responsibility of members to ensure the information they give is correct and is not misleading.

g) Where resources are made available for members to support their engagement with residents e.g. street visit cards and letter-headed paper, this will be required to meet the corporate identity guidelines.

h) The Corporate Communications team can provide members with factual advice on communications e.g. contact details for the media and guidance on the communications process.

i) The Council will provide the names, political affiliations, and contact details (both telephone and e-mail) for all elected members to support contact by the borough electorate.

7. Officers and publicity

- a) These guidelines support officers in meeting the Employee Code of Conduct on communicating information.
- b) To ensure maximum value for money and effective communications planning all officers are expected to co-ordinate on communications matters with the Corporate Communications team.
- c) Relevant officers - usually the Chief Executive, Strategic Director, Head of Service, and those at senior manager level - may speak to the media on behalf of the Council to clarify factual information. They should avoid being drawn into politically controversial discussions.
- d) Any officer speaking to the media should inform the Corporate Communications team in advance of undertaking any interview to confirm they are the appropriate spokesperson to represent the Council.
- e) Where an officer is to represent the Council in the media the Corporate Communications team can offer advice and support e.g. media training.
- f) Officers have a responsibility to keep executive members informed of significant issues which affect their relevant policy area or service delivery,

8. Communication Principles and Standards

- a) The Council's communication approach will follow the following principles:
 - i) Be lawful
 - ii) Support open, honest and transparent two-way communication
 - iii) Use correct corporate identity and style - as set out in the Corporate Identity Guidelines
 - iv) All communication will be available in an accessible format and have regard to equality and diversity
 - v) A proactive, planned and cost-effective approach to communication, advertising, and marketing
 - vi) Promote the Council's strategic vision and policies
 - vii) Set high standards on communicating with residents and other stakeholders, including 'hard to reach' groups
 - viii) Support effective partnership working
 - ix) Inform and engage with Council employees and members

b) The Council will seek to use plain language. It will handle publicity about controversial issues with care. Publicity describing the Council's policies and services will be factual and objective.

c) 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.

9) Planning for future communications

a) It is the responsibility of the Corporate Communications team to provide advice on how the Council can best achieve effective and value for money external and internal communications. The team will liaise closely with Chief Executive, Strategic Directors and the Elected Mayor and Cabinet members in carrying out this role.

b) The Corporate Communications team will co-ordinate a corporate communications plan to ensure a strategic, effective and value for money communications approach.

c) It is the responsibility of all officers organising any event, project, visit, meeting, publication or other communications activity to liaise with the Corporate Communications team in a timely manner to ensure it is considered in the strategic communications approach. This will support a cost effective approach and avoid a clash in events.

10) The media and North Tyneside Council

a) The policy of the Council in dealing with the media will be to be:

- i) Open
- ii) Transparent
- iii) Honest
- iv) Pro-active and robust
- v) Helpful to the media in facilitating interviews, photo opportunities and other reasonable requests

b) The Corporate Communications team will have responsibility for the Council's media management. And will:

- i) Promote the reputation of the organisation
- ii) Respond quickly and effectively to media inquiries
- iii) Respect the confidential nature of information which is retained by the Council

c) All media inquiries should be referred to the Corporate Communications team for a response.

d) All written responses will be approved by a relevant senior officer or Cabinet prior to issue. Where appropriate the response may require a senior officer, Elected

Mayor or Cabinet member to give an interview or briefing to a media representative, including on the radio or television.

e) All press releases and official statements issued by the Council will be distributed to the media via the Corporate Communications team.

f) Corporate press releases, media responses and statements will not be party political.

g) Corporate press releases can include relevant quotes from senior officers, Cabinet members of the Elected Mayor. Other individuals, e.g. members without special responsibilities, partner organisations, businesses or community may be considered to provide factual comment, where it can help the Council inform, explain and justify its actions and decisions to its residents and stakeholders.

h) The Corporate Communications team also monitors media calls and retains information on responses issued on behalf of North Tyneside Council to ensure accuracy, consistency and transparency.

i) Photocopies of articles from newspapers must take account of the need for appropriate licences regarding copyright. The Council has a license through the Newspaper Licensing Authority.

11. Positive publicity

a) North Tyneside Council promotes the policy of valuing all employees and the contribution they make to the successful day-to-day running of services.

b) Positive media coverage not only supports the reputation of the organisation, and informs the public about services and strategic priorities but also helps improve staff morale by publicly recognising the work and commitment of individuals and groups of people.

c) Service areas are, therefore, encouraged to promote their activities through the media and council publications by informing the Corporate Communications team of newsworthy achievements and developments.

d) 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 itself from controversy.

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.

e) The Corporate Communications team will target proactive publicity at local, regional and appropriate national/specialist media.

f) Press releases will also be displayed on the Council's website and through other social media as appropriate.

12. Negative publicity

a) When an issue that has a major negative implication for the reputation of the council comes to the attention of the Corporate Communications team, other officers or members of the Council a negative publicity strategy should be followed by directorates. This includes alerting the following offices: the Elected Mayor, Chief Executive, Strategic Directors and relevant Heads of Service and the Corporate Communications team.

b) When necessary, representatives from these areas will then meet immediately to devise a strategy for dealing with the issue (if not already in place) and agree a consistent response that can be used for external and internal audiences.

c) When preparing a response the policy will be:

- Where the council has made a substantial mistake:
We will explain what when wrong and what we are doing to put it right. We will not be defensive but take the attitude that we can learn from our mistakes.
- Where the media has made a substantial mistake in reporting the activities of the Council:
We will quickly and assertively explain the mistake to the media and ask for a right of reply where appropriate.

d) Where erroneous material is published by other parties in relation to the Council's policies and aims, the Council can respond to explain the facts in an objective manner.

13. Timing of publicity

a) The Council will make every effort to ensure that officers, members and other relevant partners 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 on significant issues the Corporate Communications team will use relevant electronic methods, including internet, intranet and e-mail to inform councillors and staff. The Elected Mayor and relevant Cabinet members will also be informed as soon as possible.

14. Communications during periods of heightened sensitivity

- a) Any election or referendum is considered a period when there is heightened sensitivity around communications and additional legislation and national guidance should be observed.
- b) The election period normally runs during the period between the announcement of an election, or at a local level the invitation of nominations and the date the election is held.
- c) Local authorities are prohibited from issuing certain published materials in the 28 days immediately before a referendum.
- d) However, there may be an extended period before the formal announcement of an election or referendum when decisions on publicity are more likely to be seen as party political and the Council will need to be seen to be even-handed.
- e) The law recognises that during periods prior to elections or referendum that local authorities should continue to discharge their ordinary functions, including determining planning applications.
- f) When delivering the communications function during the period of an election or referenda the Council will:
- i) Not give publicity to matters which are politically controversial ie clearly identifiable with a political party, opposed to that of another party and publicised without any balancing comment.
 - ii) Not include references in press releases to individual politicians who are standing for election.
 - ii) The office of Elected Mayor will be considered an a-political role, except where the holder of the office is directly involved in the forthcoming election or referendum.
 - iv) Exercise caution before undertaking any significant media campaign unless it was included in the forward corporate plan before any election has been called.
 - v) No photographs including candidates at the election will be issued to the media or to elected members.
 - vi) Photographs taken by, or facilitated by, the Council will not be permitted for use to promote an individual member for political purposes, or to influence support for a political party.
 - vii) Will publish factual information which identifies the names, wards and parties of candidates at election. This information will be provided to the media and publicised on the Council's website.
 - viii) Will suspend on-line public forums, or material hosted for third parties, where it is considered in contravention of national guidance on election publicity.

g) The election rules do not prevent responses to enquiries from the media, or issuing of press releases/ statements which do not promote candidates or parties. The Council can respond in a factual and objective way, and the Elected Mayor, Cabinet members and councillors with positions of responsibility, such as Cabinet members, will be able to make public comment on important issues that arise where they would be expected to do so because of their special responsibilities.

15. Partnership Communication

a) Where the Council is working in partnership with other organisations it is the responsibility of those involved to ensure North Tyneside Council's Corporate Communications team is informed and involved to ensure that we plan, co-ordinate and achieve best value in promoting partnership policies and services.

b) The national guidelines, including the Code of Recommended Practice, will be followed where North Tyneside Council is providing assistance to third parties to issue publicity.

c) It is also essential that any branding decision is referred to the Corporate Communications team in advance of any agreement being reached.

17. External publicity material

a) The Council's residents' publication has been proven as the main source of information about the Council for residents. It also offers a cost effective communications method that can save on alternative printed publicity. In delivering this the Council will take into consideration national guidance which suggests this should not be produced more than quarterly and should not seek to emulate local newspapers in style or content. This will not prevent the council incorporating a reasonable level of paid for advertising to subsidise the cost of the publication to the Council.

b) Additional promotional material and marketing activities may be appropriate in some circumstance, for example to attract investment or visitors to North Tyneside. However, in all instances this should be co-ordinated through the Corporate Communications team to allow its value for money to be assessed and evaluation criteria to be agreed.

c) All publicity material will clearly and unambiguously identify itself as a product of the local authority by following corporate identify and brand guidelines.

18. Websites and digital communication

a) Websites and social media play an increasing role in communications for North Tyneside Council. They not only help the organisation provide information to the public, but they are also a means for the public to access services, including directly contacting the council and paying bills etc.

b) National guidelines acknowledge that online publicity is a continuing action of local publication, and it is therefore covered by legislation on publicity.

c) There are legal risks associated with publicity through digital communication, for example defamatory comment. In view of this the Corporate Communications team has responsibility for the Council's website and digital communication.

d) Content on all social media can also impact on the Council's reputation where the organisation is misrepresented or incorrect or misleading information is published. Content on our website and social media established by a service area needs to meet the Council's Corporate Communications Guidelines and the Corporate Identity Guidelines. This will be achieved by co-ordinating all aspects of social media and digital communications through the Corporate Communications team.

e) No social media sites, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, should be established to represent the Council or its services and projects, without prior permission and consultation with the Corporate Communication team.

f) Where there is provision for members of the public to leave public comments, the Council is required to have a system of moderating and to be able to remove any unacceptable material. During a period of an election or referendum council-led online forums should be withdrawn.

19. Equality and Diversity

a) North Tyneside Council is committed to using its communications to promote equality and diversity, and eliminating discrimination against residents, service users and employees – regardless of age, disability, gender or gender identity, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status.

b) We will keep our residents, employees, partner organisations and other interested parties up to date with regard to council policies, procedures, activities, and opportunities for involvement and consultation.

c) When sharing information, the Council will be considerate of the needs of all users. Information will be produced in an accessible style and format – in line with the Corporate Identity Guidelines - and can be made available in alternative languages and formats as appropriate.

d) To reach hard to reach groups and share information with them, specialist communications approaches may be needed. We are able to provide our documents in alternative formats including Braille, audiotape, large print, and alternative languages. However, the Council will not automatically translate documents and will consider what is proportionate and reasonable in each individual case.

e) Full guidance on interpreting and translation is available in the corporate Interpreting and Translation Policy, or by contacting either the Corporate Engagement team or Corporate Communications team

20. Cost effectiveness

- a) The Council will observe national guidance on achieving value for money publicity that is fit for purpose and appropriate to the targeted audience(s).
- b) Wherever possible the most cost effective communications channels available to the Council will be used. Cost effective communications channels include the council's own residents magazine, which will be used in a planned and targeted way to support regular communications with residents.
- c) The Council will use a wide range of other effective methods available to it including the Internet, intranet, e-mail and the media.
- d) To support the delivery of value for money the council will co-ordinate all communications through Corporate Communications and services will contribute to the corporate communications planning.
- e) Where spending on publicity is required this will be subject to agreement of a Head of Service or Director and will be recorded appropriately to provide transparency on spend on corporate communications and marketing. Where substantial spend is anticipated on publicity projects expert advice may need to be considered prior to the expenditure being incurred.
- f) Where central government has issued publicity on a particular topic the Council will not incur expenditure promoting the same topic, unless it can demonstrate there is additional local value in duplicating the publicity, e.g. giving a local context to national issues.

21. Advertising

- a) Where the Council needs to pay for advertising space as part of its communication approach it will ensure that it meets national advertising standards and legislation. This will include:
 - i) The purchase of advertising space will not be used as a means for subsidising voluntary, public or commercial organisations.
 - ii) All advertising will be appropriately branded to be recognised as funded by North Tyneside Council
 - iii) No advertising, including advertising for staff, will appear in any publication owned or controlled by a political party.
 - iv) Recruitment advertising - except for political or mayoral assistants - should not refer to any political activities or affiliations of candidates.

22. Awareness of the protocol

- a) The Corporate Communications team, supported by all managers, will ensure the guidelines are promoted and implemented.
- b) The Corporate Communications team will participate as required in communications protocol training and supporting officers and members, for example with media training.

For further information please contact:

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