Chorley Council

Report of	Meeting	Date
Chief Executive (Introduced by the Member for Resources)	Executive Cabinet	28 August 2014

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA PROTOCOL

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To seek approval of the external communications and media protocol.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

2. That the external communications and media protocol (set out at appendix A) is approved.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF REPORT

3. The report sets out the external communications and media protocol which sets out the council's approach to undertaking external communications, in the written press and broadcast media as well as online.

4. The protocol is used to guide the council in approaching external communications and to set out who is involved at different stages and in different circumstances.

Confidential report Please bold as appropriate	Yes	**No**

Key Decision? Please bold as appropriate	Yes	**No**

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)
(If the recommendations are accepted)

5. The protocol sets out clearly and transparently the council's approach to external communications. It supports the council in complying with the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authority Publicity, and clearly sets out the roles and the responsibilities in undertaking external communications.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

6. To not refresh the existing media protocol. This was rejected as an option because it did not clearly apply to external communications carried out through social media and would not continue to be a relevant or useful tool.

7. To refresh the protocol but not seek Executive approval. This was rejected because it was not in the spirit of openness and transparency.

CORPORATE PRIORITIES

8.   This report relates to the following Strategic Objectives:

Involving residents in improving their local area and equality of access for all		A strong local economy	
Clean, safe and healthy communities		An ambitious council that does more to meet the needs of residents and the local area	✓

BACKGROUND

9.   The council's communications team have worked to a media protocol for a number of years, with the most recent revision in 2011. The protocol has been used as a working document to set out the council's approach to press releases and media responses, including information about how quotes are used and which team leads on the work.

10.   The protocol was updated in 2011 to reflect changes that the government had made to the local authority publicity code, and to reference press releases that were related to neighbourhood working projects. However, it still did not include reference to the increasing use of social media and the changing way in which external communications is undertaken.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL

11.   The protocol sets out the principles the council uses when undertaking external communications. They are:
   • When a spokesperson is required, it will normally be the most relevant elected member who acts as spokesperson.
   • Officers (normally a relevant senior manager) will act as a spokesperson only where a response is needed within a tight timescale and a relevant elected member is not available; where the issue concerns operational or procedural issues; or, during periods of heightened sensitivity (purdah).
   • The council will ensure that it is open and honest in its communications. The aim of communications is to achieve the priorities set out in the corporate strategy and to inform and engage with residents and customers.
   • To ensure consistency and effective delivery of messages, the communications team will manage and lead on external communications. They will work with the relevant councillor to approve messages which are aimed at residents or customers outside of customer transactions. This will include press releases, responses to media enquiries, social media, websites, electronic communications and other hard-copy materials.

12.   The principles are used through any of the external communication channels that the council uses (including online, press and broadcast media).

13.   The protocol also sets out some other key areas for managing external communications. They include:
   a.   **Planning and prioritisation**: this includes the process for agreeing external communications, which is led by the communications team with priority being given to communications that form part of the campaigns agreed in the campaigns and engagement strategy.

   b.   **Identifying the relevant spokesperson**: the approach taken to identifying a spokesperson in different circumstances. It also outlines that on social media, use will normally be made where possible of an organisational account (such as

@ChorleyCouncil on Twitter) and circumstances when an different approach may be taken.

c. **Photographs**: if a photograph is appropriate, it will normally feature the council spokesperson.

d. **Quotes, responses and stories**: the communications team will work with services to develop quotes or other information, which will then be agreed with the relevant spokesperson.

e. **Responding to letters or other criticism**: the council will not normally challenge letters published in the press or online unless it is inaccurate, highly damaging to the council's reputation or responding would more clearly set out the council's position.

f. **Management of external communications** is led and managed by the communications team.

COUNCILLORS ACTING ON THEIR OWN ACCOUNT

14. The protocol relates to the communications activities undertaken by the council. It does not limit the ability of elected members acting in their own capacity, within the code of conduct for Members.

IMPLICATIONS OF REPORT

15. This report has implications in the following areas and the relevant Directors' comments are included:

Finance	✓	Customer Services	
Human Resources		Equality and Diversity	
Legal	✓	Integrated Impact Assessment required?	
No significant implications in this area		Policy and Communications	

COMMENTS OF THE STATUTORY FINANCE OFFICER

16. No comments.

COMMENTS OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

17. The Council is obliged by Section 4 of the Local Government Act 1986 to have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity referred to in the report. The rules applying in purdah period approaching an election (or a referendum) are also mentioned.

GARY HALL
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Background Papers			
Document	**Date**	**File**	**Place of Inspection**
The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity	31 March 2011	online	https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5670/1878324.pdf

Report Author	**Ext**	**Date**	**Doc ID**
Chris Sinnott	5337	5 August 2014	External communications protocol

External communications and media protocol

Introduction

As an organisation that is open and responsive to its residents, Chorley Council is active in engaging with residents and customers. We do this through the media (including newspapers, radio and television), social media and direct marketing such as online communications and adverts.

Councils are specifically prevented from publishing any material that, either in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.

Chorley Council follows the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, which provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity. Local authorities are required by legislation to consider the code in coming to any decision on publicity and communications.

The code states that it may be appropriate to give publicity to the views or activities of individual members when they are representing the council as a whole and that communications should use the most appropriate approach to best deliver the message.

This protocol establishes the key principles and processes that will be followed when undertaking external communications.

Principles

- When a spokesperson is required, it will normally be the most relevant elected member who acts as spokesperson.
- Officers (normally a relevant senior manager) will act as a spokesperson only where a response is needed within a tight timescale and a relevant elected member is not available; where the issue concerns operational or procedural issues; or, during periods of heightened sensitivity (purdah).
- The council will ensure that it is open and honest in its communications. The aim of communications is to achieve the priorities set out in the corporate strategy and to inform and engage with residents and customers.
- To ensure consistency and effective delivery of messages, the communications team will manage and lead on external communications. They will work with the relevant councillor to approve messages which are aimed at residents or customers outside of customer transactions. This will include press releases, responses to media enquiries, social media, websites, electronic communications and other hard-copy materials.

Media channels

The council makes use of a range of channels to communicate with the public. The communications team are best placed to advise and decide on the best method that should be used in different circumstances. The key communications channels used by the council are:
- Press releases and responses to media enquiries
- Social media (in particular Facebook and Twitter)
- Website
- Direct email
- Advertising through local media and outdoor locations (such as bus shelters)

The principles set out in this protocol will apply to communications through any of these channels.

Planning and prioritisation

As far as possible, communications are planned in advance to manage the resources available, and to ensure that messages complement each other and have the biggest impact. This may sometimes mean that a message from one part of the organisation may be prioritised over another. If this is the case, it will be discussed with the relevant service and elected member.

The communications team will maintain a forward plan of press releases and other external communications which will be used alongside the campaigns and engagement strategy to identify and agree a flow of information to residents and others. Priority will be given to communications that form the campaigns identified in the campaigns and engagement strategy.

Any council officer can suggest topics for press releases or other external communications. Ideas and requests should be made to communications with as much notice as possible. Agreement about external communications should not be reached with partners, Members or others without consultation with communications.

Elected members are able to suggest topics for press releases, but should recognise that these suggestions will not be pursued should they seek to promote either the councillor themselves or a political party or agenda.

Executive members who wish a press release to be issued relating to a particular council activity should direct the request to the relevant director or head of service. The officer concerned should then speak to communications to establish, in consultation with the monitoring officer if appropriate, whether the request can be actioned and how it will be prioritised.

Identifying the relevant spokesperson

Press releases, responses to media enquiries and other media appearances will normally include a relevant named spokesperson.

The council does not issue quotes or statements attributed to 'a spokesperson' as this does not support the organisation in better engaging with residents.

When a spokesperson is used, the principles set out above will be applied. The spokesperson will usually be:

- The executive member who holds the relevant portfolio or in their absence the Leader or Deputy Leader
- The relevant Member Responsible, when agreed with the relevant Executive Member.
- The chair of the relevant committee or task group, such as overview and scrutiny
- The Mayor of Chorley for civic events or related stories
- For neighbourhood working projects – the councillor sponsor for the project (alongside a quote from the relevant Executive Member)
- The Chief Executive or relevant senior officer in the absence of available councillors, over procedural staffing issues or in periods of heightened sensitivity (such as purdah).

Councillors with a lead responsibility for an area, or ward councillors may be included in publicity in areas where they have had significant involvement as part of their role. This will be alongside and with the agreement of the relevant elected member (normally an Executive Member) acting as the council spokesperson.

On some social media sites, it is possible to post comments, posts or messages from an organisational account (for example on twitter, use is made of @ChorleyCouncil). In these circumstances, the council will use these profiles rather than a spokesperson. This is because the organisation is more easily identifiable than individuals on social media, and relies on a reputation being built on the platforms. However, in some circumstances it is not possible to post from an

organisation account (for example to groups on Facebook), or it is better to have a personal profile, then the relevant available spokesperson will be used.

Photographs and photo calls
It may sometimes be appropriate to use photographs to accompany a story. This will be determined by the communications team in deciding what approach to take under different circumstances. Photographs will normally include representatives from the council who are acting as the spokesperson alongside other relevant people. Council officers will not normally appear on photographs used for external publicity.

Agreeing quotes, responses and stories
The communications team will work with the relevant officers, services and partners to establish the facts and information for a story. They will then draft the press release, quote or other information and normally agree it with the service.

If a quote is being used, the person who is acting as spokesperson will be asked to approve a quote for use and to appear on a photograph.

Press and media contact
All media enquiries should be referred to communications. Any other member of staff receiving a call from the media should take the name, telephone number and a note of the nature of the enquiry and then pass to communications as soon as possible.

Responding to letters and other criticism
Letters published in the press or posted on social media which criticise the council will be left unchallenged unless:
- The content is inaccurate
- The content is considered highly damaging to the council's reputation
- Responding would help to set out the council's position more clearly (this is particularly relevant to posts on social media)

In these circumstances, the communications team will discuss and develop a response in conjunction with relevant service and spokesperson.

Management of external communications
The communications team will lead and manage external communications for the organisation. This supports the council in ensuring that its messages and approach are consistent and are delivered effectively.

Branding
The council has a well-established and well-recognised brand family which means that residents and others can recognise the work that the organisation undertakes. Ensuring that the brand is correctly and clearly included in materials used externally is important in maintaining the council's reputation and helping resident's understand what our role is.

In most cases where the council is delivering a service or someone is delivering a service on behalf of the council, the council's logo should be prominently displayed. Only in specific circumstances where an alternative has been agreed should this not be the case.

Partnership communications

This protocol applies to external communications undertaken with partners, unless alternative arrangements are agreed in advance by the Head of Policy and Communications.

In some circumstances, organisations receive funding from the council to deliver services. They may undertake their own publicity and communications. In these circumstances, the council should be clearly credited for the support given. This would include reference in written materials and using the council's logo on publicity.

Councillors acting on their own account

This protocol relates only to the communication activities undertaken by the council. It does not prevent or limit elected members from acting in their own capacity and undertaking such activities directly themselves.