

# Corporate Press and Media Protocol

November 2023

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Shaping the *future*  
of our borough



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## **1. Introduction and context**

- 1.1 This media protocol has been published to establish good practice regarding the management of media relations at Woking Borough Council.
- 1.2 Following government intervention in May 2023, this protocol reflects the critical role that the government-appointed Commissioner team has in the approval of council media relations.
- 1.3 The aim of this protocol is to ensure that Woking Borough Council uses its marketing communications resources to support open, accessible, and responsive communications, whilst acknowledging that council resources may not be used for party political purposes.
- 1.4 The protocol applies to members of the Executive when responding on behalf of Woking Borough Council and council officers who may be contacted by local, regional, national or specialist media, and covers print, digital and broadcast media.
- 1.5 The content of this protocol does not impinge on an elected councillor's right to post, publicise or make comment to the media.
- 1.6 Adherence to the protocol will ensure consistency of standards, accuracy of information and appropriate political and officer input with a view to protecting and enhancing the reputation of Woking Borough Council.
- 1.7 Given that not all situations can be covered in detail, this protocol is designed to be as flexible as possible.

## **2. Legal framework and the code**

- 2.1 Woking Borough Council must comply with the publicity provisions set out in the Local Government Act 1986.
- 2.2 The term 'publicity' is defined in the act as "any communication in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or a section of the public."
- 2.3 Section 2 of the act places a prohibition upon councils that they "shall not publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to support a political party".
- 2.4 In addition, councils are required by Section 4 of the act to have regard for the [Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#) when making any decision on publicity.
- 2.5 The code provides seven guiding principles that council publicity should follow.
  - 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.

2.6 The code also gives recommended practice on aspects of publicity covering subject matter, costs, content, dissemination, advertising, recruitment advertising, publicity about individual members of an authority, timing of publicity, elections, referendums and petitions, and assistance to others for publicity.

### **3. Marketing communications team**

3.1 The marketing communications team provides a proactive and reactive media liaison service, as well as advice and support to all council service areas and members of the Executive.

3.2 Providing a professional information service to the media is a key responsibility.

3.3 The team operates during normal office hours and, in addition, during important out of hours events such as elections, council-led events and at times of crisis. There is no formal out of hours service.

3.4 Its main roles are to manage and maintain relationships and reputation, as well as promote proactive publicity on council policy, services and initiatives, partnerships, achievements and other issues affecting the council and the borough.

3.5 In addition, the team monitors and logs coverage of Woking Borough Council in the media.

3.6 The marketing communications team should be the first point of contact for all media enquiries and all outgoing publicity or potential promotional opportunities with the media.

3.7 The team's expertise and knowledge ensures opportunities for proactive positive news are maximised and negativity is mitigated and managed wherever possible.

3.8 To maintain a good working relationship, the team must be trusted by the media and the wider community. It will never knowingly mislead the media on a story.

3.9 The council's communication resources must not be used to affect, or be designed to affect, public support for a political party or to provide a political advantage to any one councillor.

### **4. Media relations**

4.1 The media plays an important role in publicly holding the council accountable for their actions to the people it serves.

4.2 Positive media coverage supports the reputation of Woking Borough Council.

- 4.3 The council values the role the media and is committed to developing strong professional and positive working relationships with local, regional, and national media.
- 4.4 The council is committed to transparency and will take a proactive approach wherever possible when dealing with the media.
- 4.5 The way the council is portrayed in the media has a major influence on how it is perceived, and every opportunity should be taken to publicise the council's services, decisions, policies, and initiatives.
- 4.6 Council officers should support the marketing communications team with media relations. Failure to do so risks the council's reputation and could lead to the circulation of misinformation.
- 4.7 Officers contacted by members of the media should immediately refer them to the marketing communications team. Officers should never give their opinion on specific council policy.
- 4.8 Statements, press releases or press notices must not be issued to the media on behalf of Woking Borough Council without prior approval of the marketing communications team.

## **5. Proactive media relations**

- 5.1 Proactive news will be issued to the media in the form of press releases. All content will follow a corporate style appropriate for the targeted audience and will accurately reflect the corporate view of Woking Borough Council.
- 5.2 Press releases on behalf of Woking Borough Council will:
- be concerned only with matters that relate to the council's services, functions and strategic objectives
  - not contain anything of a political nature
  - adhere to relevant legislation concerning publicity issued by local authorities, especially around election time
  - include an approved quote from the appropriate Portfolio Holder, Leader/Deputy or in some instances CLT member.
- 5.3 All press releases will be drafted by the marketing communications team in collaboration with the relevant technical officer.
- 5.4 When drafted approval must be sought from the relevant technical officer and quoted councillor within a specific timeframe. This is to enable the timely distribution of news to the media.
- 5.5 When a response is not received, approval will be escalated to the Leader/Deputy and/or relevant CLT member.
- 5.6 Councillor quotes will never be issued without prior consent.
- 5.7 When issuing proactive media relations approval of the commissioner team must also be sought.

5.8 Once approved, press releases will be issued to a centrally held list of media contacts which includes local and regional media, residents' associations and other interested parties.

5.9 Press releases will also be published on the council's website, promoted through relevant social media channels and issued via the council's email newsletter when appropriate. A central record of issued press releases will be maintained.

5.10 Please refer to Appendix 1 for a flow diagram outlining the approvals process.

### **5.11 Press notices**

5.11.1 In certain cases, it is appropriate to issue a press notice.

5.11.2 These are short, factual statements, such as a brief announcement or notice.

5.11.3 Press notices do not require an officer or councillor quote.

5.11.4 Approval is only required from the technical officer.

## **6. Responding to the media**

6.1 The marketing communications team is the recognised first point of contact for all media enquiries.

6.2 Council officers should refer all media enquiries to the marketing communications team. They must not respond directly to the media.

6.3 The marketing communications team will make a judgement about how an enquiry should be answered. This will usually take the form of a written statement. In certain instances, it is appropriate to participate in an interview.

6.4 Please refer to Appendix 2 for a flow diagram outlining the approvals process.

### **6.5 Written responses**

6.5.1 Written responses will be drafted by the marketing communications team in conjunction with the relevant technical officer.

6.5.2 In the first instance the relevant Portfolio Holder or Leader/Deputy will be quoted.

6.5.3 Senior officers will only be quoted where a member of the public would reasonably expect an operational officer perspective, such as when:

- there is a need to respond extremely quickly in changing circumstances to maintain the flow of information to the public
- specific technical information is being explained

- there is a legal aspect to the comment which would benefit from attribution to an officer rather than a councillor.

6.5.4 Approvals will follow the same process set out in paragraphs 5.4, 5.5 and where necessary paragraph 5.7.

6.5.5 In the event that neither the relevant Portfolio Holder, Leader/Deputy or CLT member is unavailable, an appropriate technical officer will approve the quote attributed to a 'council spokesperson'.

## **6.6 Media interviews**

6.6.1 In certain circumstances it is in the council's interest to participate in a media interview. This will either be a pre-recorded or live interview over the phone or in person.

6.6.2 The spokesperson will be the relevant Portfolio Holder or Leader/Deputy. In some instances, as outlined in paragraph 6.4.3, it is appropriate for senior officers to act as spokespeople.

6.6.3 The marketing communications team will provide the nominated spokesperson with agreed key lines and messages.

6.6.4 Spokespeople should have undertaken some degree of media training before participating in any interview. It is recommended all spokespeople have attended council-approved media training.

## **6.7 Media briefings**

6.7.1 When announcing significant council news it may be beneficial to host a briefing for members of the media.

6.7.2 The marketing communications team will organise the briefing, invite key media contacts and prepare briefing notes containing agreed key lines/messages.

## **6.8 Public speaking**

6.8.1 Council officers should be aware that appearances, speeches or presentations at public events may be reported by the media.

6.8.2 Council officers must seek prior approval before accepting invitations to participate in professional/sector events, such as being a panel member at a conference.

6.8.3 Council officers should refer such invitations to the marketing communications team who will make a judgement about their participation in collaboration with the Chief Executive.

6.8.4 Where participation is agreed, the marketing communications team will support the officer with key lines and messages.

## **7. Councillor media contact**

- 7.1 In their role as community representatives, councillors are entitled to contact and make comment directly to the media.
- 7.2 Where members of the Executive make comment to the media on council-related business, councillors are asked to inform the marketing communications team for media monitoring purposes.
- 7.3 In such instances it is recommended that Executive members contact the marketing communications team who can provide advice and support before responding to the media.

## **8. Commissioner team approvals process**

- 8.1 It is critical that the Commissioner team has the opportunity to review and provide comment on press releases and public statements before they are issued to the media.
- 8.2 The press release/statement will be sent to the Commissioner team for their approval within a specific timeframe. This is to enable the timely distribution of news to the media.
- 8.3 If the marketing communications team does not hear back from the Commissioner team approval will be deferred to the Chief Executive.
- 8.4 Only once approved by both the Leader/Deputy and the Commissioner team will press release/statements be issued to the media.
- 8.5 If there is doubt about what is or is not in scope, please refer to the Commissioner Team's Chief of Staff.

## **9. Negative media**

- 9.1 It is critical to the reputation of Woking Borough Council to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully to limit the potential for negative publicity.
- 9.2 Officers must alert the marketing communications team as soon as possible to any potential negative issue which may attract media interest. Officers should not wait until contact is made by the media.
- 9.3 When preparing a response, the following strategy will be followed.
  - Where the council has made an error, 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.
  - Where the media has made a substantial mistake in reporting council activities, the council will robustly explain the mistake to the media and seek a right of reply.

9.4 Approvals will follow the same process set out in paragraphs 5.4, 5.5 and where necessary paragraph 5.7.

### **9.5 Correcting inaccurate reporting**

9.5.1 Should the media publish/broadcast an inaccuracy relating to council business, policy or process, a prompt decision will be taken on any action necessary to correct it.

9.5.2 The issue will be discussed with the Leader/Deputy and/or the Chief Executive to agree a plan of action.

9.5.3 It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can be counterproductive to complain. Each case must be judged individually.

### **10. Publicity during election periods**

10.1 In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, all proactive publicity about candidates or other politicians is halted. This applies to local and national elections. This is known as the pre-election period.

10.2 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity makes clear that particular care should be taken in periods of heightened sensitivity, such as in the run up to an election.

10.3 The code recommends that councils should generally not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters and that publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published unless expressly authorised by statute.

10.4 What this means in practice.

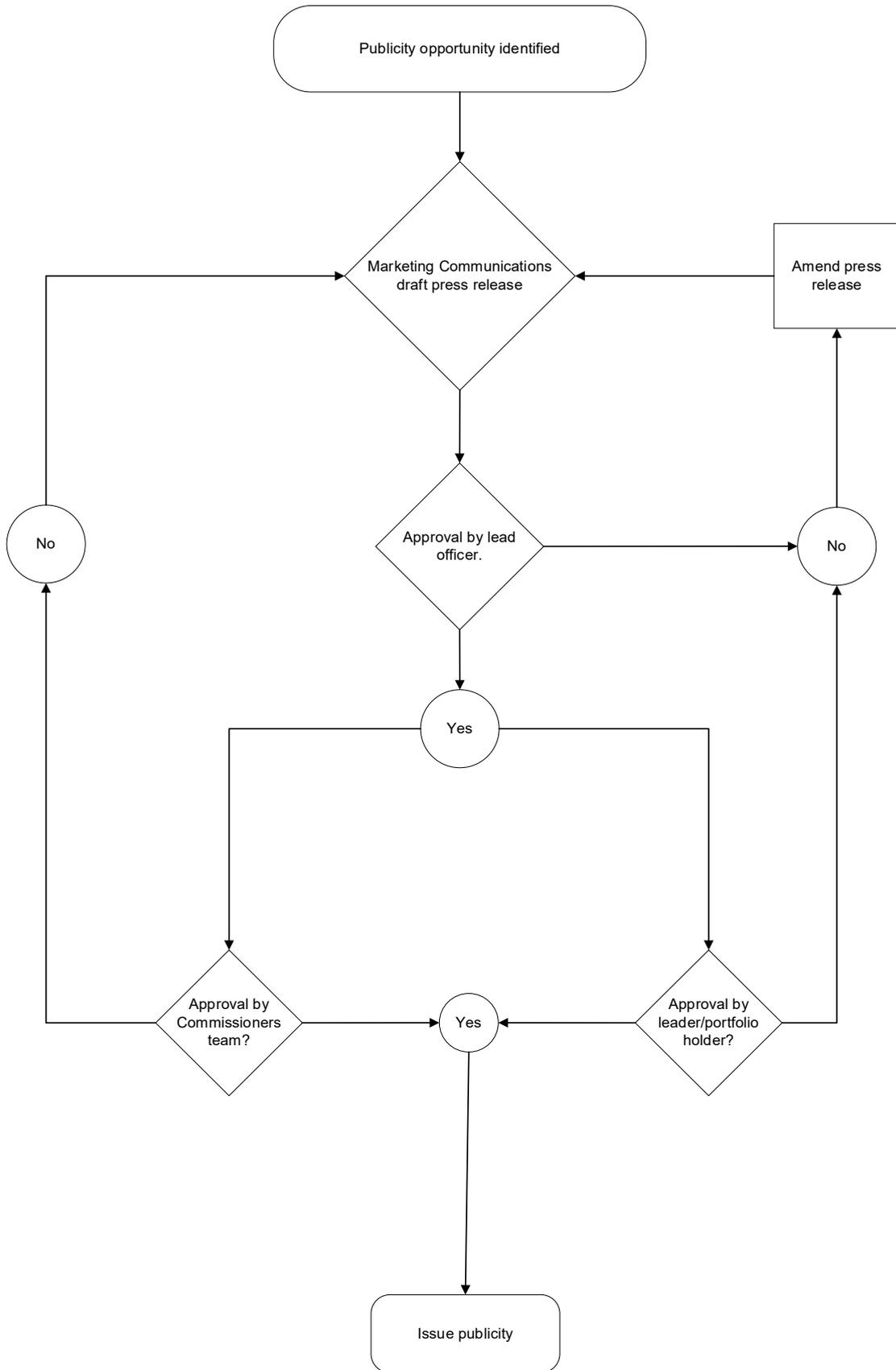
- The primary restriction is on proactive publicity by the council which particularly relates to candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.
- The council can still issue media releases on factual matters provided that these do not identify individual councillors or groups of councillors.
- Councillors are still free to respond to enquiries received from the media in a personal capacity.
- Individual councillors can issue their own statements, write letters for publication to the media, contact the media directly or say what they like in a personal capacity, but must not use council resources to do so.

10.5 It is still possible for the council to issue statements on behalf of a councillor holding a key political or civic position provided it relates to important events which are outside the council's control and can be shown to

justify a councillor response. These occasions are likely to be rare and to be the exception, rather than the rule.

10.6 Where a quote is required during the pre-election period, the relevant officer may be quoted.

## **Appendix 1 – Proactive media relations**



**Appendix 2 – Responding to the media**

