# Media Protocol



## **Produced by Hartlepool Council’s Public Relations Unit – December 2014**

# Introduction

The media should be viewed as an opportunity to help communicate the vision, work and decisions of the Council to local residents and beyond. To help achieve this, the Council has a small Public Relations team. It is part of their role to develop positive relationships with the media on a day-to-day basis. This is supported by the Chief Executive’s Corporate Management Team (CMT) and the Leader of the Council.

The media as an industry is continuing to grow and with the advances in modern technology, news now travels much quicker around the world. Consequently, it is not just the local media that the Council has to deal with, it can be any media organisation around the globe.

One of the main principles of the Council’s Corporate Communications Strategy is that we will be open and transparent. We will always endeavour to meet media deadlines. The Council will always comment on matters which are relevant to it, although there will be occasions when we are limited as to what we can say. This applies to things such as the financial affairs of individuals and when there are legal proceedings. However, “no comment” is not an option for this Council.

This media protocol outlines what is expected of both officers and councillors when dealing with the media. It also describes what the Council expects from the media.

#### Role of the Public Relations Office

## The Public Relations Office will co-ordinate dealings between the media and the Council. Immediacy is the key to good media relations, so whether you are an officer of the Council, councillor or member of the media you should always be able to speak to a public relations officer during normal hours. Out of hours contact details are at the end of this protocol.

# Role of departments

Officers should always be alert to issues that could be of interest to the media and keep the Public Relations Office informed. This is particularly important for the launch of new initiatives where public relations officers will be able to advise on media-related matters. Officers should also endeavour to keep relevant councillors informed of media issues.

# Dealing with the media

This can either be on a proactive or reactive basis.

## **Proactive**

The Council adopts a proactive approach and issues press releases on a daily basis. These are also posted on the Council’s website ([www.hartlepool.gov.uk](http://www.hartlepool.gov.uk)).

It is normal practice to include quotes in press releases from either officers, councillors or both. This largely depends on the nature of the story. This is an area that the Public Relations Office can advise on. There are some restrictions under the Local Government Code of Conduct on Publicity regarding quoting councillors in press releases. This is covered later on.

Officers and councillors are encouraged to liaise closely with the Public Relations Office to ensure that there is a regular flow of press releases sent to the media. Public relations officers will also maintain contact with all departments to give advice and help generate newsworthy stories.

Once a press release has been written, it will be forwarded to the officer/councillor responsible for approval. Public Relations officers will always give consideration as to whether the appropriate chief officer/councillor needs to either see/be made aware of a story before it is sent out.

# Reactive

The Council can expect to receive a wide range of requests from the media on a daily basis. This could include requests for press statements, radio and television interviews or to participate in a television documentary. All of these are co-ordinated by the Public Relations Office who will liaise with appropriate officers/councillors, depending on the nature of the request.

It is important to meet media deadlines wherever possible and co-operation from officers/councillors would be appreciated. Whilst we should never be rushed into responding to an issue, it will not reflect well on the Council if there is a long delay in getting back.

Judgements will have to be made as to who within the Council responds to media requests. This will often involve discussions with officers at a senior level as well as councillors. Where an agreement cannot be reached, liaison will take place with the Chief Executive/Assistant Chief Executive and Council Leader/Deputy Leader.

## **What we expect from the media**

The Council has already stated that it will be open and transparent with the media. We expect the same in return. This means that when the media approaches the Council, they present the full facts of the issue so that the Council can respond in the most appropriate way.

Permission should also be sought before the media take photographs or conduct recordings/interviews of Council business.

## **Social Media**

Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are also key outlets to communicate key messages and the work of the Council. The Council has a Social Media policy which can be viewed on the intranet and there is also a Council-wide officer group monitoring the effectiveness of Social Media and how it can be enhanced in the future.

## **Media Training**

In-house courses to help officers/councillors deal with the media are organised on a regular basis by the Public Relations Office. As well as covering general background about how the media works, the courses help people to deal with radio/television interviews. A booklet is also available which covers dos and don’ts when dealing with the media.

For further information, a copy of the booklet or to book onto a course contact the Public Relations Office. Contact details are at the end of this protocol.

# Important Guidelines

Various Local Government Acts give councils powers to deal with publicity issues. The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity gives guidance on how these powers should be exercised. The Code states clearly that any publicity describing the Council’s policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on the facts or explanation or both. There are also restrictions on publicity in the run-up to an election. The Council, through their publicity, are entitled to explain their policies and actions, but they are not permitted to campaign on political or other controversial issues with a view to persuading the public to a particular view. When commenting on policies and proposals of central government and other public bodies, the Council should present arguments fairly and in a balanced and objective manner.

Further guidance/clarification regarding the above can be obtained from the Public Relations Office or the Council’s Chief Solicitor.

## **Contact details**

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**Out of Hours Emergency Number –** Please call (01429) 869424 and ask for a member of the Public Relations team to call you back.