

GUILDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL

(Approved by the Council on 3 December 2009)

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INTRODUCTION

The Council's external communications are governed by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity – 2001. The Council's communications protocol adheres to this code and applies to all publicity and other communications issued or produced and paid for by the Council.

If there is any doubt over, or challenge to, the interpretation or application of this code, the matter will be referred to the Chief Executive for a decision. Where agreement about communications content cannot be reached, the Chief Executive will decide.

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity – 2001 provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity. It also covers issues such as advertising; the provision of assistance to others for publicity; publicity about individual councillors; and the restrictions during an election period.

The code states that 'the main purposes of local authority publicity is to increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs; to allow local people to have a real and informed say about issues that affect them; to explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities; and in general to improve local accountability'.

The government in January 2001 commented in relation to alterations to the Code on Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity that, 'as well as increasing public awareness of the Council and its role generally, a primary purpose of local authority publicity should be to seek the views of local stakeholders about issues which will have an impact on local communities'.

Communications at Guildford Borough Council

The Council is committed to effective communication. Our Core Values state that our work 'will be publicly accountable and presented with openness and transparency'. This clearly reflects the Government's priorities on accountability.

The communications protocol explains the Council's approach to managing external communications, the media, working procedures and the role of officers and councillors involved in this process. A separate document deals with the Council's consultation policy.

The Council communicates in a variety of ways and uses a range of online and offline methods. These include the website, email newsletters, advertising, posters and publications, as appropriate. The communications protocol applies to all of these communication types.

LEGISLATION AND A SUMMARY OF KEY ELEMENTS OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE

All communications are governed by provisions in the Local Government Acts 1972 and 1986 and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 1988, as well as alterations to the code which came into effect on 2 April 2001.

The Local Government Act 1986 states that ‘A local authority shall not publish any material which in whole, or in part, appears to be designated to affect public support for a political party’.

Section 6 of this Act defines publicity as ‘any communication, in whatever form addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public’.

The alterations to the national Code of Recommended Practice were revised to take account of various changes, including:

- the political structures in local government;
- increased emphasis on partnership and requirements for consultation;
- the rapid advances in communication technology, especially the electronic media; and
- the provisions of the Human Rights, Disability Discrimination and Equal Opportunities Acts.

Some of the key points of the code relating to communications are summarised as follows:

- Publicity should be relevant to the functions of the authority.
- The aim should be to achieve the greatest possible cost-effectiveness. To achieve this, there may be cases where the benefit of higher expenditure to gain better presentation, or improve other aspects of publicity will justify the extra cost.
- Any publicity describing the Council’s policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation of both.
- Where publicity is used to comment on, or respond to, the policies and proposals of central government, other local authorities or other public authorities, the comment or response should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.
- Publicity relating to the provision of a service should concentrate on providing factual information about the service. In some cases, promotional publicity may be appropriate, for example, about the Council’s leisure facilities and other commercial activities.
- Publicity touching on issues that are controversial or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council is unavoidable. Such publicity should be handled with particular care. Issues must be presented as clearly, fairly and simply as possible, although councils should not over simplify.
- Publicity campaigns by local authorities are appropriate in some circumstances: for example as part of a consultation process or to promote the effective use of local services. Such campaigns may also be an appropriate means of influencing public behaviour or attitudes on such matters as health, safety, crime prevention or equal opportunities. Local authorities should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.

- Website information, council newspapers, leaflets and other publicity distributed directly to households reach a far wider audience than publicity available in person from the Council. Electronic means should be considered, but those without access to such systems should not be excluded.
- Local authorities should not discriminate in favour of or against persons or groups in the compilation and distribution of material for reasons not connected with the efficiency and effectiveness of issuing the publicity.
- Advertising can provide a cost-effective, efficient means of telling potential clients about local authority services. It will not normally be appropriate as a means of explaining policy. It is not acceptable to purchase advertising space to subsidise a voluntary, industrial or commercial organisation or to a publication associated with a political party.
- Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the Council and their responsibilities. It may include information on individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council and should not be party political. Political slogans advocating policies of a particular political party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals is not appropriate. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory. Personalisation of particular issues or personal image making should be avoided. (For the Council, this would mean, for example, that the Council Leader or a Lead Member could be quoted in a Council press release or in *About Guildford*, but comments must reflect their official roles and not their personal, political roles).
- Regarding elections, the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity states:

'The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election. Publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in such a way that identifies them with individual members or groups of members. However, it is acceptable for the authority to respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided that their answers are factual and not party political. Members holding key political and civic positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for member level response to an important event outside the authority's control. Proactive events arranged during this period should not involve members likely to be standing for election'.

In addition, the code states that the Council should not produce publicity designed to influence the views of local people on petitions, referendums or specific proposals. Any publicity should be factual in such circumstances.

The code and any restrictions only apply to publicity and other communications issued or produced and paid for by the Council. It does not apply to press releases or other information issued directly by councillors or their political parties, although any such press releases must emphasise that they are not issued by or on behalf of the Council. All councillors can comment legitimately by contacting the local media directly to explain and express views on Council decisions.

A copy of the full code is available from Public Relations and Marketing and on the Department of Communities and Local Government website.

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS - WORKING PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES

The Council will abide by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

Services, policies, decisions and new initiatives will be promoted by the Public Relations and Marketing Section within the Corporate Development service. They will use press releases, interviews, briefings, photo-calls, filming opportunities, literature, online articles, the website and other means as appropriate.

The Public Relations and Marketing Section will provide the Chief Executive, senior managers and councillors with advice on communications issues, which relate to the reputation of the Council and its policies and services. The Section also aims to abide by the professional guidelines of the Institute of Public Relations.

Communications and consultation issues will be given a high priority by senior officers and will be considered as part of service and other planning processes.

Effective communication is every member of staff's responsibility. Officers will keep the Public Relations and Marketing Section informed about plans and items that could generate media interest or require other types of communication with sufficient advance notice to maximise opportunities

Accountability and clarity are key issues for local government in successfully engaging with their local communities. A fundamental element in local accountability is a high level of public awareness of who is responsible for leadership roles. It is therefore desirable that Lead Members and the Council Leader, in particular, should have a high profile in the local media and be associated with important policy decisions made by the Council. The Public Relations and Marketing Section aims to assist this process as outlined in this protocol.

The Council will try to make all communications accessible to everyone. Council publications will be provided in large print, braille, on audiotape and in other formats if the public request it. The public can also request documents in a different language. Language line and other translation aids will also be used as appropriate to help the public access the Council's communications.

The Media

Providing a professional information service to the media is a key responsibility for the Council. The Council takes a proactive approach to working with the media wherever possible.

Research shows that the media is one of the main ways that residents gain information about The Council. The media is also a significant source of information for staff and councillors. The Council needs a good working relationship with the media and values the role they play in disseminating information.

The way the Council is portrayed in the media has a major influence on the way it is perceived and every opportunity should be taken to publicise the Council's services, decisions, policies and initiatives.

While the local media is independent and will sometimes print or broadcast stories which do not show the Council in the most positive light, a good working relationship with them gives the opportunity to balance such stories with a Council comment and to provide balancing positive news.

It is important that officers and councillors support the PR and Marketing Section in responding to media enquiries in a timescale that meets journalists' deadlines. If the Council fails to reply in time, the journalist may source their story elsewhere or record a 'No comment' response, which may not be in the Council's interests.

The Public Relations and Marketing Section will never knowingly mislead the media on a story. In order to maintain a good long-term relationship, the Section needs to be trusted by the media and the wider community.

Media Contact

The Council aims to ensure that:

- Efficient responses are provided to media enquiries.
- All responses are logged centrally so that outgoing messages are consistent and are handled correctly. All media enquiries should be put through to the Public Relations and Marketing Section in the first instance (with the exception of those received by specific venue marketing staff and Safer Guildford's publicist).
- Only media trained staff act as spokespersons. (Regular corporate media training is carried out).
- Senior officers identify and anticipate key issues for local residents and inform the Public Relations and Marketing Section with sufficient notice so that output reflects these key issues.

Spokespersons

The most appropriate spokesperson will be chosen to support publicity opportunities for Council services and activities.

Council spokespersons need to be reached in time for media deadlines which are often extremely tight. In the event that the first choice spokesman is not available, an appropriate substitute will be found.

In the interests of public accountability, the profile of councillors as the democratically elected leaders of the Council is vitally important. Where appropriate and practical (at the discretion of the Public Relations and Marketing Section and the senior officer concerned), a designated councillor will be approached to provide comment in their official Council role, as set out in the following paragraphs:

Leader of the Council and Lead Members:

- Except in those cases described below, the Leader (or in their absence the Deputy Leader) or the relevant Lead Member will be approached to provide comment on any issues within their area of responsibility.

Chairman of Regulatory Committees:

- The chairmen or, in their absence, the vice-chairmen, of the Planning or Licensing Committees will be approached to provide comment on issues within the responsibilities of those committees.

Chairman of Scrutiny Committees:

- The chairman or, in their absence, the vice-chairman, of a scrutiny committee will be approached to provide comment on matters generated through the work programme of that committee.
- The chairman or vice-chairman of a scrutiny committee will not be approached to provide comment on an item:
 - which the committee has requested to consider prior to its scheduled determination by the Executive; or
 - which has been “called-in” by the committee.

Group Spokespersons:

- Group spokespersons have been appointed by group leaders to provide comment when the media request an opposition view. This would be direct to the media and not via the Public Relations and Marketing Section.

Local Ward Councillors:

- Where an issue is specific and local to a particular ward, the PR and Marketing Section will invite the local ward councillor(s) to provide a comment. PR and Marketing will review the comment and recommend for inclusion as appropriate to the Lead Member. Where there is any disagreement or need to clarify appropriateness, the comment will be referred to the Chief Executive for a decision. For wards represented by more than one councillor from the same party, they must agree and supply one quote attributed to one of them. If there is more than one party represented within a ward, then each party may supply one local ward quote.

With the agreement of councillors, their contact details will be made available to the media so that the media can contact them direct if they so wish.

Councillors will not act as spokespersons in press notices, some trade releases, Mayoral releases and responses to purely factual enquiries.

The Mayor:

The Mayor, as first citizen, may be asked to comment on behalf of the borough in relation to civic events or where the Mayor has a long-standing personal commitment to local issues e.g. the Mayor’s Charity. In some circumstances, they may also be asked to comment in the event of a major incident or emergency.

Officers:

Officers may also act as spokespersons to provide operational or more technical explanation or background or on occasions where a councillor is not available.

Press Enquiries

Press enquiries can result in a written statement (particularly when issues are sensitive in order to be sure the Council's position cannot be misinterpreted), an oral response or a spokesperson interview. They will follow the same approval procedure as press releases and statements, which is available on the Loop.

Press Releases/Statements

All releases must be issued by the Public Relations and Marketing Section. This ensures a consistent, controlled and corporate approach.

Exceptions to this are those services with their own marketing and publicity teams attached to venues, and the Safer Guildford Partnership. Officers within such services must copy their releases through to the Public Relations and Marketing Section for information. These officers routinely liaise with the Section when corporate/problematic issues arise.

Official Council publicity material must not have a political bias and the Public Relations and Marketing Section reserves editorial control over its content and style.

Press Briefings

Press briefings have two main purposes:

- To help explain complex or sensitive issues that will aid the media's understanding of the subject and more accurate reporting.
- To communicate an important or major story (good and bad news) that will attract media attention.

Press briefings will be held as required. They will usually comprise one or more councillors and/or officers depending on the situation and as outlined under Spokespersons. A representative from the Public Relations and Marketing Section will also attend.

Press Notices

These provide important, factual information about normal day-to-day activities of the Council. They include matters such as road works and closures, minor emergencies (such as the closure of offices, leisure venues or other premises to which the public normally have access) and basic event information. These would not normally include a quote from a councillor. In a major emergency, they also allow the Public Relations and Marketing Section to issue important advice speedily with officer approval.

Trade Releases

Releases issued to the trade press which are specialised or technical will usually be approved by and quote an officer.

Factual Enquiries

Some media enquiries require simple factual responses, for example clarifying a very straightforward point on a release which has been issued. In such cases, the Public Relations and Marketing Section will deal directly with the query, taking the advice of an officer when appropriate. Sometimes an officer may speak direct to the media (in liaison with the Public Relations and Marketing Section) to answer a purely factual query or a written response could be issued.

Elections

According to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, the Council has a duty to ensure that no candidate or politician directly involved in an election gains an unfair advantage by appearing in council publicity during the lead up to an election. This includes any councillor who is an agent for a candidate or who has been involved in the nomination process, even if they are not personally standing.

Councillors holding key political and civic positions will still be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for member level response to an important event outside of the Council's control.

Individual by-elections do not require the same degree of control as there are fewer elected members involved in the process. Communications involving councillors not directly involved in a by-election are generally acceptable, subject to the code of practice and making sure that they are designed not to affect public support for a political party.

The following restrictions apply to all councillors during Guildford Borough Council and general elections and to individual councillors who are candidates or directly involved in European, county or parish elections.

Restrictions affecting publicity:

From the time of a notice of an election until after the election itself, no candidates or councillors directly involved in the election will be quoted or depicted in any publicity or other communications issued or produced and paid for by the Council.

During this time contact details, committee membership and information on individual content pages will be visible on the councillor pages on the Council's website. Links from pages to external websites will be suspended. Content must continue to comply with the approved Publishing Protocol for members' web pages.

The Mayor will continue to attend community and civic events in an official capacity as the first citizen of the borough. The Mayor's diary will continue to be issued in relation to these events.

The Council should continue to publicise its work as normal only taking into account the above restrictions. Officers should be quoted or depicted as appropriate.

Media and other organisations will continue to cover news and events in the same way, subject to their own procedures, as the restrictions only apply to publicity produced by the Council. During the run up to an election, councillors can still generate publicity independently of the Council.

Media Monitoring

Press enquiries, releases and statements are logged on the Newsflash computer system by the Public Relations and Marketing Section. Information on media coverage and other statistics can be provided as required using Newsflash reports.

Letters

Letters and articles, which are critical of the Council, appear occasionally without Council comment. When this is the case, a judgement needs to be taken as to when it would be in the overall interests of the Council to respond.

Among officers, letters should only be written with the approval of a strategic director and should be issued by the Public Relations and Marketing Section. On occasions, the Council Leader, appropriate Lead Member or chairman of a regulatory committee may be asked by an officer to submit a letter in collaboration with the Public Relations and Marketing Section and relevant director, head of service or senior officer as part of their official Council role. In this situation the councillor would issue the letter.

Councillors are at liberty to respond to and issue letters independently of the Council in their political capacity.

About Guildford

The contents list for *About Guildford* and subsequent articles and layout will be reviewed and approved by the Editorial Board.

About Guildford must not have a political bias and the Public Relations and Marketing Section reserves editorial control over the content and style of the newspaper.

Publications

The Council may need to produce leaflets, publications or other literature to communicate with residents and other stakeholders. These should be planned and produced according to the publications guidelines and associated questionnaire published on The Loop.

Website

The editorial style and management of the website is the responsibility of and is managed by the Web Programme Manager in liaison with a cross-service team of web administrators. The Public Relations and Marketing Section will work closely with them on corporate communications and other content as required.

Advertising

When the Council places advertising, it should always be factual and non-political and in accordance with the Council's advertising policy, which is published on the Loop.

Advice and support on placing advertising and the design and copywriting of advertisements is given by the Public Relations and Marketing Section. The Section is also responsible for organising key corporate advertisements, key campaign adverts and various directory entries. Officers should also contact them if they are approached to purchase paid for 'advertorial' articles and seek further advice.

Councillors/Political Groups

Press releases and letters issued by the Council will be non-political and not feature dissenting material from opposition bodies.

Any political group can issue its own press releases and letters and make other arrangements for media coverage, but this should not be done using Council resources. Individual councillors may also wish to highlight something in the media or respond to media coverage concerning their ward.

In such cases releases and letters must:

- Be issued independently of the PR and Marketing section.
- Be clear in their presentation that they are from the councillor rather than from the Council.

- Indicate in the wording that it expresses the individual councillor's point of view and does not necessarily represent Council policy.

At the councillor's discretion, it is helpful if such releases and letters can be copied to the Public Relations and Marketing Section when they are issued, so that the Section is aware in advance of any issues that may result in a press enquiry for the Council to respond to.

Council and Committee Meetings

The local media are sent agendas for committee and other meetings and regularly report at these meetings. When appropriate, the Council will issues releases before or after a meeting to highlight key items. The responsible councillor (as outlined under spokespersons), strategic director or head of service should raise this with the Public Relations and Marketing section as part of the planning process.

Motions, petitions and questions from individual councillors will not be publicised through Council press releases, briefings or *About Guildford*.

Equalities Statement

This protocol is intended to operate within the Council's commitment to equalities and diversity including;

- equal treatment regardless of race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief, with reasonable adjustments where necessary in line with the Disability Discrimination Act
- working to eliminate unlawful discrimination
- promoting equal opportunities
- promoting community cohesion including good relations between people of different racial groups
- providing reasonable access to interpretation or support on request

This policy document is available in alternative formats (Braille, large text, translations and verbal explanation) on request. Please contact our PR and Marketing Section if you need any assistance.