

# **PRESS, MEDIA AND PUBLIC FORUM PROTOCOL ELECTED MEMBERS**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this Protocol is to guide the elected Members of the Council in their relations with the Press, Media and public fora in such a way as to ensure the smooth running of the Council and to ensure the Council does not come into disrepute. It will also ensure that the Council's messages are consistent.

This protocol provides guidance on how to deal with some of the practical issues that may arise when dealing with the Press and Media and addressing the public by whatever mechanism is available.

Above everything else, an elected Member must observe the Council's Code of Conduct and all other policies, procedures and regulations whenever he/she conducts the business of the authority, conducts the business of the office to which he/she has been elected/appointed, or acts as a representative of the authority.

## **Council's Press Office**

The Council's press office (Communications, Marketing and Engagement team) receives all communications from the Press and Media and issues News Release / Statements on behalf of the Council.

In the absence of the Press office staff, media communications will be referred to the Head of Paid Service who will deal with any enquiries as necessary.

The Press Office will not speculate on matters which are raised and will seek the necessary response on discussion with the relevant Officer, Leader or Deputy Leader of the Council and/or the relevant Committee Chairman as considered appropriate.

With the exception of the Head of Paid Service, Directors and the Council's Press Office team, no other Officer of the Council is permitted to speak or communicate with the Press and Media on any matter affecting the Council or its business unless prior authorisation is obtained from the Head of Paid Service, Directors, but the Press Office must be consulted in all cases.

## **Members of the Council**

- Elected Members can express a Ward, political party or individual personal view to the press, media or in public forums but should indicate that it is a personal opinion and does not necessarily represent the view of the Council. In addition, Members should be careful when expressing a view to respect the following points:
- Elected Members have an obligation to respect Council policy, irrespective of their own personal views, they should not seek to undermine a decision through the press or any public forum.
- Elected Members should be advocates for the Council and provide clarity to our community on what the Council is seeking to achieve.
- Elected Members should not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This prohibits any discussion with the press on any matter which has been reported as confidential items on a Council or Committees' agenda or at any other private briefing.
- During the pre-election period or 'Purduh', elected Members should only comment with their own personal views. During this period news releases will be issued in the name of the Director or Council Spokesperson, as appropriate.

## Press and Media Protocol

- A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Maldon District Council.
- When speaking or providing written material to the Press, Media, or at public fora, Members should make clear the capacity, in which they are providing the information. For example:
  - as Leader or Deputy Leader of the Council;
  - as Chairman of a Committee;
  - as Leader or Deputy Leader of the Opposition;
  - as an individual (i.e. letter to press for publication);
  - as Ward Councillor.
- A copy of any written material sent to the Press, Media or any open fora, by a Member, **as representing the Council**, should be copied to the Press Office ([Press.office@maldon.gov.uk](mailto:Press.office@maldon.gov.uk)) and the Leader or Deputy Leader should also be made aware.
- Take particular care if the press or media approach you for comment on a controversial subject, and do not be led into stating something you did not really mean to say. **Please ask them to contact the Press Office.**
- An elected Member should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer at meetings held in public or before the press.

## Dealing with the Press

When responding to the Press on a ward issue, Members should be aware of the following:

- Be informed and certain of all your facts.
- Ensure that when making comments on behalf of the Council that you are aware what the Council Policy is and that your comments reflect that policy.
- Be positive and help the enquirer to understand the purpose of the Council's actions.
- Be calm.
- Ensure that your comments and views will not bring the Council, its Councillors or its staff into disrepute and ensure that comments are neither libellous nor slanderous.

## Issues to be Aware of

- Members not used to dealing with the press may be surprised when they see that statements made in all innocence, look very different in print than they did when they were spoken. It is advantageous to write out a statement or position beforehand and discuss this with the Press Office.

## Meetings of Council and Committees

Copies of Agenda, Minutes and Reports sent to Members for meetings of the Council or its Committees are e-mailed to the Press and Media and will be placed on the Council's web site seven days before the meeting.

Facilities are provided at meetings for the Press to take notes of the proceedings, but both the Press and Public may be excluded from a meeting whilst certain confidential matters (as provided for in the relevant legislation) are under discussion.

## **Press Releases**

- All news release / statements made on behalf of the Council will be prepared by the Press Office.
- The Press Office, in consultation with the Leader or Deputy Leader of the Council and / or the relevant Committee Chairman, is authorised to publish news releases / statements on any matters relevant to the work of the Council, its Officers and Partners.

This document has been prepared as a guidance note for elected members. It represents the policy of the Council in respect of its relationships with the Press and Media and the conduct of Councillors in public forums. The policy has been prepared to ensure consistency in the Council's dealing with the Press, Media and at public forum and details who is authorised to speak on behalf of the Council.

It ensures that the views and policy of the Council are presented accurately.

In providing information to the Press and Media or to any public forums, Officers and Members representing the Council will abide by the "*Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity*" published by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The overriding principle of this policy is that all elements of the Press and Media will be treated equally.

### **Definitions:**

**Public Forums** = Any mechanism of communicating with the public, which includes (but is not restricted to), Websites; Journal; Facebook; Twitter; Leaflets; public speaking opportunities; blogs (web or phone); LinkedIn Sites, etc.

**Purdah** = Between the notice of an election and the election itself the Council will follow the guidelines set out in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity, namely that:

- (a) The Council cannot publish proactive publicity in any form which relates to candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.
- (b) 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. Nor should we publish any material which appears to give support to, or encourage the support of, any particular group or party'.
- (c) Proactive events arranged in this period should not involve members who are or who are likely, to be standing for election and other members who are directly involved in the elections.
- (d) Councillors holding key political or civic positions can only comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the Council's control.
- (e) The Council can respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided the answers are factual and not party political.
- (f) Any prospective candidates must be treated equally.

Our normal Media Protocol is therefore suspended, and the following must be followed:

- ALL enquiries from the Press should be referred to the Press Office in the first instance
- Quotes in news releases should be attributed to Head of Paid Service, Director or Council's Spokesperson (Communications Manager) as appropriate and approved by them in the normal manner.