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MALDON DISTRICT
COUNCIL

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CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL

1 INTRODUCTION, SCOPE AND CONTEXT

1.1 ‘Corporate communication’ is a dialogue. It is about ensuring that an appropriate message is given, using the right medium, to all those who need to receive it, and how in return their messages are received.

1.1.1 The purpose of this protocol is therefore to:-

- Ensure that the Council communicates in an accurate, timely and appropriate way that meets its own needs and those of its stakeholders.
- Ensure that stakeholders are well informed on matters relevant to them.
- Ensure that stakeholders have an appropriate mechanism to communicate their views, feelings, opinions etc to the Council in a way that influences, and is seen to influence, Council decision making.
- Use all available methods in which to communicate our messages, promote, enhance and protect the Council’s reputation to secure maximum benefits for the Council and the District in general.

1.1.2 The scope of this protocol is therefore:-

- Communication with the media and other external stakeholders concerning the Council’s policies, plans and activities.
- Communication with colleagues internally to ensure that they are kept informed of our media response concerning the Council’s policies, plans and activities.
- Communication with our external partners and co-ordinate messages as necessary.
- Consultation with the community and other external stakeholders in so far as the Corporate Communications function interfaces with and contributes to the Council’s consultation strategy.

1.1.3 This protocol is mindful of a number of existing strategies but does not specifically deal in detail with the following:-

- Promoting the Maldon District as a visitor destination
- Individual service and business plans.
- Marketing or promoting individual services except as part of promoting a corporate message.
- Petitions including e-Petitions
- Emergency plan
- Economic Prosperity Strategy
- Member/Officer Protocol
- Code of Conduct

1.1.4 Whilst not directly in the scope of this protocol, it must also feed into other strategies, such as our Channel migration strategy, customers’ strategy, consultation strategy, specific service related marketing, Human Resources policies, financial services, e-Petitions etc.

- 1.1.5 The protocol now goes on to identify what core messages we want to promote to a variety of audiences, how we will do it and the implications for the Members of the Council, our Public Relations Team and colleagues both inside and outside of the organisation.

1.2 Council's Press Office Protocol

- 1.2.1 The Council's press office is managed by the Council's Public Relations and Engagement Team and receives **all** communications from the Press and Media and issues **all** News Release/Statements on behalf of the Council.
- 1.2.2 The Press Office will not speculate on matters which are raised and will ask for an enquiry to be emailed in order to seek the necessary response in discussion with the relevant Officer, Director and Member as considered appropriate.
- 1.2.3 With the exception of the Chief Executive, Directors and the Council's PR & Engagement Team (Press Office team, which also includes the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager). No other Officer of the Council is permitted to speak or communicate with the Press and Media on any matters affecting the Council or its business in general, unless after discussion with the Press Office, and as authorised by the Chief Executive, and/or Director, the Leader and/or Deputy Leader of the Council or Committee Chairman and/or Vice-Chairman
- 1.2.4 If an issue is highlighted to the Press Office by a Member, a copy of the response given will be sent to the originating Member for information.**

1.3 Council Staff

- 1.3.1 All staff must adhere to the paragraph above (1.2.3) and failure to do so will be seen as a breach of the Council's code of conduct and ultimately may result in disciplinary action being taken in line with our current policies.**
- 1.3.2 Staff should also show respect and courtesy to Members *at all times in line with the Member /Officer Protocol* and not be seen to do otherwise. Staff will also be reminded of the confidentiality of their posts and the availability of the whistleblowing policy.**
- 1.3.3 The PR & Engagement Team also works in conjunction with the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager with regards to Planning PR matters.
- 1.3.4 The Press Office may from time to time use the term 'Council Spokesperson' to respond to agreed enquiries but it should also be acknowledged that the press may also use this term as a matter of course following a response to an enquiry.
- 1.3.5 However, this is not the case for approved press releases which would normally have an agreed Member quote included.
- 1.3.6 A style guide is available for staff and this provides useful guidance on items such 'house' font, writing for the web and a variety of letter templates**
- 1.3.7 In the unlikely absence of anyone in the Public Relations and Engagement Team, media communications will be referred to either the Chief Executive's PA or the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager, who will deal as necessary with any enquiries.
- 1.3.8 Staff should ensure that Ward Members are advised of issues which may affect their Ward in addition to the relevant Committee Chairman/Vice Chairman/Leader or Deputy Leader as required.**

1.3.9 *Either a member of staff or the Press Office will ensure that if an issue is highlighted to the press office by a Member, a copy of the response given will be sent to the originating Member for information.*

Appendix 1 shows the process which should be followed when dealing with the media.

1.4 Meetings of Council and Committees

- 1.4.1 Copies of agenda, minutes and reports for meetings of the Council or its Committees are e-mailed to the Press and Media and placed on the Council's web site seven days before the meeting.
- 1.4.2 Facilities are provided at meetings for the Press to take notes of the proceedings and 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.
- 1.4.3 Members of the Public Relations and Engagement Team when available will attend agenda meeting to advise on any matters as necessary.

2. MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

- 2.1 Elected Members of the Council play a key and valuable role in communicating the work of the Council to its residents, the media and business community.
- 2.2 Elected Members can express a **Ward**, political party or individual personal view to the press, media or in public forums but should indicate that any such opinion does not necessarily represent the view of the Council.
- 2.3 An elected Member must be mindful of the Council's Code of Conduct and all other policies, procedures and regulations whenever he/she conducts the business of the authority, or conducts the business of the office to which he/she has been elected, appointed, or acts as a representative of the authority.

2.4 *If Members fail to adhere to the paragraph above they may be in breach of the requirement for respect and confidentiality as stated within the Local Code of Conduct and may therefore have sanctions applied to them pursuant to the Code (local code of conduct).*

- 2.5 In addition Members should be mindful of the following;
- Elected Members should not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion with the press on any matters which may have been discussed as a confidential item on the Council's or Committees' agenda or at any other private briefing or working group.
 - During the pre-election period or 'Purdah', elected Members should comply with the guidance issued. During this period news releases will be issued in the name of the Chief Executive, Director or Council Spokesperson as appropriate

2.6 Dealing with the media

- 2.6.1 A Councillor should act with integrity at all times when representing or acting on behalf of Maldon District Council.
- 2.6.2 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

- 2.6.3 Members are advised to keep a copy of any response which is given to the media so as to record the question and the response.
- 2.6.4 Members are advised to take a cautious approach when dealing with the media if asked for a comment on a controversial subject. It is advisable that the assistance or guidance of the Council's press office is obtained, rather than being led into stating something you did not really mean to say.
- 2.6.5** *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. **This should be addressed through the existing Member/Officer protocol.***
- 2.6.6 The Chairman of the Council is the Civic and Ceremonial head of the Council to which is attached great importance in terms of the Council's profile of the District both locally and outside of the District. A separate and detailed protocol already exists for this position and is therefore not part of this Communications protocol.

3. OUR VISION, VALUES & MESSAGES

- 3.1 Underpinning the communications protocol is the overall vision of the Council, and its four corporate priorities: one internal and four external. Our vision is clearly focussed on the type of community we are striving to achieve and our priorities demonstrate our commitment to support our overall vision.

Our Vision

To make the Maldon District a better place to live, work and enjoy

Our Goals

Helping communities to be safe, active and healthy

Protecting and shaping the District

Creating opportunities for economic growth and prosperity

Delivering good quality, cost effective and valued service

- 3.1.2 As part of this protocol the Council's vision and corporate identity will be reinforced.
- 3.1.3 Alongside our vision, brand and values, we need to identify the key messages we wish to promote and in what areas we wish to be recognised for our success.
- 3.1.4 Key messages must run throughout all communication we have with our residents and partners and need to relate to the community. They are critical to:-
- Reinforce what we are trying to achieve; and
 - Provide a clear, simple focus for our actions.
- 3.1.5 Repetition of message is important so that the use of key messages becomes standard practice.
- If the story does not contain a key message, don't tell the story

3.2 The Council's good name

- 3.2.1 The Council has a well known brand which is depicted on livery and stationery as a Thames Sailing Barge but there is a need to continually enforce this message corporately in all of our internal and external communications.

- 3.2.2** *In addition, the Council is acting as an advocate and supporter of the 'Sense of Place' brand which is being used to promote the District and its eclectic mix of businesses. This complements the Council's own brand and is used in line with the specific Sense of Place guidelines.*

- 3.2.3 Our Customer Contact Centre promotes the Council's good name through their endeavours to ensure that customer enquiries are dealt with at the first point of contact and together with our Customers Strategy provides a solid foundation in which to ensure that the Council is customer focussed.

4. COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE

- 4.1 In order to effectively communicate the message to our residents it is important that any communication is:-

- Relevant to them and where they live
- Timely and accurate
- In plain English (and other formats as appropriate)
- Factual
- Honest – admitting when we're wrong and being prepared to apologise.

4.2 Letting the community tell our story

- 4.2.1 Day-to-day communications should focus on the service users and tell the story through their eyes – how has this new service affected their lives? Why is it making an impact in their community?

- 4.2.2 Charter Marks, ISO Accreditation, Beacon Awards and such like may be important to the organisation, but residents may not perceive their true value if the message is not seen as a high priority for our residents.

- 4.2.3 To communicate our message effectively we need to turn the message around to focus on them – how are we going to make their life better?

- 4.2.4 The Public Relations and Engagement Team will assist in enabling stories originating from the Council to be written in a more proactive manner:-

- Sourcing contributions from our residents and partners where possible
- Members to endorse initiatives, where possible.
- Wider involvement of Members: feeding back information from successful community projects.

4.3 Keeping the public well informed – key sources and publications

- 4.3.1 All Key publications should be co-ordinated centrally and reviewed by the Public Relations and Engagement Team to ensure that key messages are used appropriately and consistently.

- 4.3.2 These core methods of communication would need to be identified but could include:-

- Specific service information leaflets
- Online A-Z Guide
- The Courier (annual)
- Media releases
- Council Tax information
- Our Web site
- Social Networking Sites

4.4 Specific Service Information Leaflets

- 4.4.1 There is a critical need for the public to have a clear understanding of the range of services we provide and who they should contact.

4.4.2 Feedback in the past has suggested that customers:-

- Do not understand what services are provided by the Council
- Do not know the best way to access services

4.5 A-Z Guide of services

4.5.1 The online A-Z guide of Council services provides an excellent method of communicating the services undertaken/offered by the Council

4.6 The 'Courier' - Council newspaper

4.6.1 The Courier is produced annually and distributed door-to-door as well as being available via our web site and covers matters which affect our residents or which relate to the District.

4.6.2 The Vision for the Courier is to provide;

- Factual and cross cutting information about the work we do
- Greater involvement from our partners, providing information that is 'joined up', reflecting the fact that customers are concerned with the services they need, and not with who provides them.

4.7 Media Releases

4.7.1 It is vital that the Council is able to tell its story in its own words to its residents and the most effective way of managing key messages is through a good relationship with the media.

4.7.2 A toolkit called 'working with the Media' is available on the intranet and from the Public Relations and Engagement Team has been developed in order to assist colleagues in how to help us to raise our profile of the Council in the print and broadcast media. It gives a template of how to construct a news release and other useful hints and tips.

4.7.3 A regular press briefing is just one way in which to ensure that the correct message is given and understood to the media and these will be co-ordinated as necessary.

4.7.4 Specific promotions/campaigns will require a managed communications action plan developed by the Public Relations and Engagement Team and will require key actions/milestones.

4.7.5 A regular dialogue with the media is vital in order to maintain and build good relations with them.

4.8 Council Tax Information

4.8.1 The current Council Tax bill information is provided mainly as part of the online billing process and provided information about how we spend the money.

4.8.2 Opportunities are also used to communicate messages to residents who use monthly billing and this in the past has included messages from our partner organisations.

4.9 Web Sites

4.9.1 Web sites are a key Communication tool and provide the Council's with world-wide 'shop window'.

4.9.2 Our corporate web site was upgraded in 2016 and provides information which can be viewed across a number of devices using 'responsive' technology. Our ability to offer on-line

transactions 24/7 has increased together with a web site which can be developed to meet any future needs.

- 4.9.3 The information on the site will be accurate, interesting, useful and user friendly. This will be monitored by the Public Relations and Engagement Team, Web Site Super User Groups and IT.
- 4.9.4 The Visit Maldon District web site was also refreshed and re-designed in 2016 to meet the growing demands of our visitors. A new events calendar, e-shop and tourism branding as part of the Sense of Place project has enabled the production of a vibrant interactive site

4.10 Social Networking

- 4.10.1 The Council is proactively using social networking as one of the key communications tools.
- 4.10.2 We manage our social media through an online dashboard and are continually expanding our use of the social media channels and have developed an acceptable use of social media guidance document for staff.

4.11 Selling the vision

- 4.11.1 To maximise the impact of the key messages, the Council must promote itself and its work to the community. This can be done cost-effectively (although requiring some budget) and will help to reinforce key messages in a visual way.
- 4.11.2 This promotion should:-
- Reflect the vision and brand image;
 - Show how the Council is adding value and making lives better;
 - Take credit for the work that the Council does; and
 - Signpost customers to services.
- 4.11.3 This should be a combination of PR and advertising (each supporting the other) to get across key messages about our services with a strong visual element, for example the refreshed approach to our recruitment activities.

4.12 Branding everything we do

- 4.12.1 It is important that the Council receives the credit for the work that it is responsible for and where we are working in partnership with others for example:-
- Leisure Centres and car parks - should have appropriate branded signage.
 - Major project developments - funding should be set aside at the earliest time for promotional activity and branding.
 - Partnership working – wherever the Council is working in partnership equal branding opportunities should be given
 - Seeking opportunities to use both the Council's own brand whilst also supporting the 'Sense of Place' brand.

5. ENGAGING WITH THE RESIDENTS

- 5.1 Closer engagement with residents should be seen as key to improving the quality and effectiveness of Council services.
- 5.2 Developing customer opinion and involving service users' needs to be undertaken constantly to maintain a highly level of service and customer satisfaction.

APPENDIX A

- 5.3 However, citizen and user engagement should not just be about consultation exercises, but it is a fundamental way in which to communicate with, involve and seek the views of local people.
- 5.4 Good media relations have an important part to play in any such consultation working with colleagues to ask the correct questions as per the Consultation Strategy which will inform future decisions.
- 5.5 This should not be seen as a once-a-year duty to consult, but an integral part of any regular feedback from stakeholders, community panels, focus groups, staff, youth forums, hard to reach groups and other partners as appropriate.
- 5.6 The Council has also demonstrated its commitment to improve the profile of the Council and local government in general as a partner in the LGA's Reputation in Local Government initiative.

6. SUMMARY

- 6.1 It is the responsibility of everyone to deliver effective communication. The Chief Executive, Corporate Leadership Team, Members and Staff must be responsible for driving the protocol by actively applying its principles to all aspects of their work.
- 6.2 The Public Relations & Engagement Team will work across services to deliver a comprehensive good news service and deal with bad news as and when it arises.
- 6.3 The Public Relations & Engagement Team, supported by Corporate Leadership Team and with Member consideration, will be responsible for strategic thinking, driving forward the good news and making day-to-day decisions about promoting the Council and its services.
- 6.4 By working together, the delivery of this communications protocol will ensure that the Council grows in reputation and builds a strong relationship with the public.

Media enquiries

Members and officers are encouraged to inform the PR and Engagement team of items of potential media interest

All media enquiries including interviews should be directed to press.office@maldon.gov.uk in the first instance

ENQUIRIES

Forwarded to the appropriate officer
(**Planning issues:** the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager) to seek a response.
If an issue is highlighted to the Press Office by a Member, a copy of the response given will be sent to the originating Member for information

INTERVIEWS

Press office to liaise with the relevant Member, Director or their nominated spokesperson
(**Planning issues:** the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager will assume liaison)

Matters of fact

The response must be agreed with the Director or nominated officer

Matters of contention or requiring comment

The response must be agreed with the Director or nominated officer and, at the discretion of the Director, attributed to the relevant Chairperson or Ward Member (in which case that Member's agreement must be obtained), Director or Council spokesperson. Exceptionally, a specific member of staff may be nominated by a Member or Director

Briefing for Member if appropriate

Press office to confirm arrangements with the media
(**Planning issues:** the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager to confirm arrangements with the media and inform the press office)

Agreed response forwarded to press.office@maldon.gov.uk

Proof read and sent to the media



Proactive media (news releases and statements)

Members and officers are encouraged to liaise with the PR and Engagement team regarding the production of news releases/statements on potentially controversial issues as well as 'good news' stories.

The PR & Engagement team has the sole responsibility to send approved news releases/statements to the media. Exceptionally, (eg in the event of urgent need and the non availability of any members of the team), the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager of Chief Executive's PA will assume responsibility.

All news releases/statements, including where possible a draft quote from a Member, must be approved by the Director



Planning issues:
the Programme and Stakeholder Liaison Manager will obtain Member's approval/amendment of quote if appropriate before sending it to the press office



The approved news release should be sent to the press office where it will be proof read and any major amendments returned to the Director for approval



Press office will email requesting Member's approval/amendment of quote where appropriate



Approved news release/statement emailed to the media

All press releases/statements are emailed to the 'press contacts list', copied to Corporate Leadership Team, the originator of the news release, circulated to all Members and uploaded on to the Council's website and linked to our social media accounts

Media enquiries received by Elected Members directly from the media

1. Members are encouraged to speak to the media on matters relating to their Ward
2. If a Member is approached to discuss a decision of Council or one of the committees they should ensure that they are clear in what capacity they are commenting (ie Ward Member, Committee Member, or individual)
3. Members are advised to respond in writing to the media so as to record the question and the response
4. Out of courtesy, the Leader or Deputy Leader or relevant committee Chairman/Vice Chairman should be made aware of any such approaches
5. It would also be helpful for the Council's press office to be made aware at press.office@maldon.gov.uk
6. Please note during an emergency this process replaced with the emergency protocol led via Gold Command