

Communications protocols and principles

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1. Introduction and objectives

1.1 Good communication and engagement creates a positive experience for those who interact with the council. They help residents, employees, partners, and the media understand Herefordshire Council's objectives, values, services, challenges and achievements. Through efficient and effective communication, the council will improve local engagement and understanding. However, without clear protocols the reputation of Herefordshire Council is vulnerable. These protocols form part of the code of conduct for employees and elected members. They have been developed to support and govern all communications and marketing activity within Herefordshire Council, including press relations.

1.2 The objectives of the protocols and principles are:

- To establish, promote and embed effective working protocols to govern and guide the way Herefordshire Council communicates and engages with a range of stakeholders.
- Present a professional, co-ordinated and consistent approach that is customer centric and supports our audiences and services.
- Provide guidance for all employees and elected members to mitigate risk and promote council services and activity.

1.3 The communications team aims to provide guidance and leadership on communications and marketing activity. It will take responsibility for promoting and monitoring the communications protocols and principles, including highlighting instances when the protocols have not been observed and provide evidence to monitor the impact, which may include supporting any resulting investigation or disciplinary procedure.



2. Scope

2.1 Protocols apply to any Herefordshire Council communication, including:

- Press releases and statements to the media
- Digital content including web copy, visual/ audio content and social media
- Any communication or document prepared by Herefordshire Council services for public consumption, including advertising, leaflets, newsletters, reports, posters, banners, flyers or websites
- Any document or publicity with which Herefordshire Council is associated with. Even if the publication is produced in partnership or is a joint document then the communications protocols and brand guidelines still apply
- Any publication or work prepared for the public domain, by consultants or contractors when working on behalf of Herefordshire Council.
- Internal communications to staff and partners.

2.2 Protocols apply to everyone who works for Herefordshire Council in any capacity, or who represent the organisation in some way, including:

- All elected members
- All employees within the organisation, including those employed on an agency, freelance or consultant basis
- Volunteers working with council service teams
- Partners, providers and suppliers (including contracted or commissioned services) that may want to refer to Herefordshire Council in publicity material.

2.3 Employees should refer to the communications and marketing tool kit on the intranet for other communication resources which includes the communications strategy, brand guidelines, style guide and templates.

3. Protocols for elected members



3. Protocols for elected members

See also section 7 Legal framework and political dimension and section 9 Elections.

3.1 It is important members are supported and confident in communicating council processes, priorities, services and decisions. However, there is often a need for elected members to distinguish between when they represent Herefordshire Council in the press, on social media, and in public or when they are representing their personal views, those of their political group, or those of other groups of which they are members. Members should also have regard to the member code of conduct and the protocol on use of council resources by members when acting in any capacity as a member of the council. To assist in clarifying roles:

- The leader of the council - on combined portfolio and/or high profile issues
- Cabinet member– on subjects relevant to their portfolio including policy and decision making
- The chairman of the council - on civic matters
- Chairperson of any committee– on the business of the committee (see later)
- Ward member – on issues specific to their ward
- Group leader – giving the views of their group
- Individual members of the council – may express a personal view but should not speak on behalf of the council other than as above. If they are making representations on behalf of constituents or communities they should make clear that this is the case.

3.2 When elected members are representing the council and commenting on operational or service matters, they should work with the communications team to deliver a full and accurate response. Members should, in the first instance, use the relevant processes or channels for raising any concerns or complaints they may have about policy direction (with the relevant cabinet member) or operational matters (with the chief executive or relevant director) before making any comment externally to ensure their comments are informed and accurate.

3.3 To assist members and to provide the most effective communications and support compliance with the protocol on use of council resources and the code of conduct a member should not issue a press release, statement, letter for publication, or organise a press conference on behalf of Herefordshire Council, without notifying the communications team in advance. Political groups will have their own arrangements for issuing communications on behalf of their group. Members wishing to make comment as individuals are not required to notify the communications team in advance, but should ensure it is clear they are making such comment in a personal capacity.



3.4 Any press queries should be through the communications team. If an elected member is contacted directly by a local or national journalist in respect of Herefordshire Council, it is requested that they advise the communications team and provide the statement issued to press. This helps ensure consistency and accuracy.

3.5. Members should be aware of the legal framework and political dimension relating to communication as covered in point 6 of this document.

4. Committees

4.1 Committees have a vital part of the effective running of the council, monitoring decisions and making recommendations to the cabinet and the authority as a whole.

4.2 The chair of a committee may initiate, with the communications team, press releases or statements if they have the support of the membership. The chairperson will be the designated press spokesperson and they will be quoted or featured in publicity such as press releases and photo calls, representing the views of the committee, but not their own personal or political party views.

4.3 The communications team will support the chairperson to issue press releases and statements on reports, liaising with the key spokesperson for comment and relevant officers for factual information.

4.4 At the beginning of a review, consideration will be given by the chairperson of the reviewing body to the issuing of a press release. Where appropriate, the press releases can be issued before the committee meeting in order to promote interest and understanding of the issues (although the decision of the committee must not be anticipated).

4.5 All enquiries from the media relating to any review will be handled by the communications team and discussed with the chairperson before a response is given. Individual councillors on scrutiny panel may make their own statements relating to their involvement if they work with the communications team to ensure a co-ordinated response.

4.6 Press releases issued after the meeting must reflect the majority view of the committee and a range of members will be consulted on content, by the chairperson and the communications team.