

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. It helps 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. 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 engagement activity within Herefordshire Council, including press relations and social media approach.
- 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 resident-focused
 - Provide guidance for all employees and members to mitigate risk and promote council services and activity.
- 1.3.** The Communications Team aims to provide guidance and leadership on communications and engagement 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 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:

- Members
- 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 page on the intranet for other communication resources which includes the communications strategy, brand guidelines, style guide and templates.

3 Protocols for 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 Chair of the Council - on civic matters
- Chair of any committee– on the business of the committee (see later)
- Ward Member – on issues specific to their ward or representing their ward's views
- 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.

3.3 When members are representing the council and commenting on strategic or operational 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 or to the Press, to ensure their comments are fully informed and accurate.

3.4 To provide the most effective communications support, and to 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.

3.5 If a member is contacted directly by a local or national journalist and asked to speak on behalf of Herefordshire Council, they should refer the journalist to the communications team. If this is not possible, and they are an official spokesperson (as defined in 3.1 above) they should advise the communications team and, if required, provide the statement issued to the press. For specific high profile media issues relating to members' wards, members are able to refer to the communications team for support. This helps ensure consistency and accuracy.

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

3.7 Appointees to outside bodies should refer to the body's own communications protocols. Statements or queries about Herefordshire Council's approach to the outside body should be directed to the appropriate Cabinet Member.

4 Committees

- 4.1 Committees have a vital part to play in the effective running of the council, monitoring decisions and making recommendations to the cabinet and the authority as a whole. The chairperson of a committee may initiate, with the communications team, press releases or statements on matters determined by the committee. 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. 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. At the beginning of a scrutiny review, consideration will be given by the chairperson of the reviewing body to the issuing of a press release. Where appropriate, a press release 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). All enquiries from the media relating to any scrutiny review or committee agenda item will be handled by the communications team and discussed with the chairperson before a response is given. Press releases issued after a 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.

5 Protocols for employees

5.1 Working within the Council

These guidelines provide the protocols and principles for day-to-day communication activities for the council. Individuals and service areas can seek advice from the communications team on a wide range of issues. The following section provides an overview on day-to-day protocols for the following areas, more information on specific topics can be found in other chapters in this document:

- Expectations and requirements when working with the press & media
- The use of social media
- Updating Herefordshire Council and other corporate websites
- Guidance and requirements for working with partners
- Help to promote consultations
- Internal communication
- Guidance on advertising and sponsorship

5.2 Working with the media

For the full protocols on working with the media, see section 7 'Working protocols for communications team and the media'.

- 5.2.1 Only employees who have received media training and communications team support and permission should act as official spokespeople. The process of 'senior suitable' will apply and the Communications Team will provide guidance on the most appropriate person to speak to the media on behalf of Herefordshire Council.
- 5.2.2 Service areas should notify the Communications Team well in advance of positive or negative issues that may be of press interest. Statements or press releases can be prepared by the Communications Team in advance of enquiries, to help protect the reputation of the service and the organisation.
- 5.2.3 Employees of Herefordshire Council may be asked by the Communications Team to respond quickly to media requests for interviews or background operational information. Those approached by the Communications Team will receive an email from pressoffice@herefordshire.gov.uk and should respond to this email within 24 hours, so that press deadlines are met and that the reputation of the service and the organisation is protected.
- 5.2.4 All approaches by the media should be directed to the Communications Team. If an employee is contacted directly by a local or national journalist, the employee must observe the following process:
 - Advise the journalist to contact the Communications Team in the first instance (by calling 01432 260006 or email pressoffice@herefordshire.gov.uk) or offer to transfer their call.
 - Take the name of the journalist, the publication they represent and their telephone number
 - Notify the communications team immediately if the call is not transferred and provide the journalist's contact details
 - The Communications Team will follow up with the journalist directly and identify the most suitable person to respond to the request.
- 5.2.5 Approved spokespeople may be approached directly by the press at meetings or events and may need to respond immediately to direct questions. The Communications Team should be involved well before a meeting or event, to help provide expected media questions and help formulate draft responses. A Communications Team representative

may choose to attend/ join events that may be high profile for media coverage

- 5.2.6 The Communications Team should be made aware as soon as possible when a statement has been made to the Media, especially if outside of the agreed protocols.

5.3 Social media

For the full protocols on social media, see section 8 'Protocols for social media'.

- 5.3.1 The employee code of conduct applies both online and offline. An employee must not bring the council into disrepute via their social media activity (either as part of or outside of work). Failure to adhere to the code of conduct may result in disciplinary procedures.
- 5.3.2 No individual or service area may undertake a social media account as representing a service area or representing as Herefordshire Council, without prior agreement from the Communications Team.
- 5.3.3 Service areas that wish to manage a social media account will need to submit: A business case; background information; a commitment to the best practice guide for social media community management; and a commitment to mandatory training to help support the application. These will be reviewed and determined jointly by the Communications Team and Information Governance team.
- 5.3.4 A list of approved social media community managers will be maintained by the Communications Team. Performance reviews of individual channels will be reviewed periodically to ensure return on investment for employee time and to manage reputational risk.
- 5.3.5 Employees of Herefordshire Council will often be asked by the Communications Team to respond quickly to social media queries (as a customer service channel). Those asked by the communications team to assist in responding to social media enquiries should do so promptly.
- 5.3.6 Management of corporate social media accounts will be monitored by the communications team. Any employee's access to platforms or services may be suspended as part of a performance management or disciplinary process.

5.4 Websites

- 5.4.1 All content should adhere to the brand guidelines and style guide. All copy should be in clear English and avoid the use of jargon. All images should be cleared with the communications team and if possible, be locally relevant.
- 5.4.2 All website content will comply with the accessibility requirements of the [Public Sector Accessibility regulations 2020](#) and [WCAG2.1](#), and where this isn't possible an explanation or alternative will be offered – full details are in the [online accessibility statement](#)
- 5.4.3 Services are responsible for checking the accuracy and relevance of their web pages monthly to ensure content is current and correct. The web team are responsible for ensuring all web content is useful and useable.
- 5.4.4 All websites should feature google analytics to allow accurate reporting and insight. The Head of Communications will monitor analytics to ensure sufficient engagement and promotion, demonstrating return on investment and mitigating reputational risk.
- 5.4.5 When necessary, and with support from the Communications Team, services may produce dedicated websites to help support a sub-brand, service or business outcomes. A clear business case and objectives should be provided when working with the

Communications Team to ensure on potential return on investment of funding and officer time, and to mitigate reputational risk.

5.5 Working with partners, contractors and commissioned services

- 5.5.1 Herefordshire Council will work closely with multi-agency partners, strategic partnerships and other independent groups and organisations to ensure effective strategic and operational communications.
- 5.5.2 The Communications Team will attend strategic communications meetings with officers managing key partnerships, and sometimes key partners, to assist in the identification and dissemination of key messages and communications.
- 5.5.3 If Herefordshire Council branding or sub-branding is to be used by third parties, branded materials should be referred to the communications team to ensure proper and consistent representation.
- 5.5.4 The Communications Team can provide assistance to individual council-maintained schools on sensitive and contentious communications issues. If a school is contacted by the media, they should liaise with the council's Communications Team prior to responding.

5.6 Consultations

- 5.6.1 All consultations will be conducted using the corporate approach, with data insight and advice from the Strategic Intelligence Team or a suitable external agency. The Communications Team should be informed at an early stage to help support the proactive and scheduled corporate promotion of the consultation.
- 5.6.2 Herefordshire Council will adhere to the government consultation principles - a set of principles to be more effective in consulting the public and to help avoid consultation fatigue. This will include sufficient online feedback on the results of consultations.
- 5.6.3 Digital engagement methods that allow a supportive user experience should be employed to make it easier for the public to contribute and feed in their views, using clear language in plain English and compliance with the accessibility requirements of WCAG2.1 and the Public Sector Accessibility Regulations.

5.7 Internal Communications

- 5.7.1 The Communications Team will lead internal communication channels, strategic messaging and the flow of information to help employees of Herefordshire Council become natural ambassadors and advocates for the council's vision and work.
- 5.7.2 The Communications Team will manage promotional opportunities both online and offline, working with services as well as partners, providers and contractors to ensure the correct and appropriate representation and messaging to ensure maximum impact, and the efficiency and effectiveness of all communications.
- 5.7.3 The Communications Team work to a dedicated internal communications campaigns to provide staff with support and information that are co-ordinated with the council's external communications campaigns.

5.8 Campaigns

- 5.8.1 The Communications Team will be responsible for the delivery of corporate campaigns. These will be developed to align with the key themes within the county plan and relevant services will be asked to provide supporting information to help deliver the campaign such as case studies, service information, and social media content.
- 5.8.2 The Head of Communications will agree and co-ordinate the campaign plan, and proactive communications will be structured to fit within the plan according to the council's key themes and priorities.

5.9 Advertising and Sponsorship

For the full protocols on advertising and sponsorship, see section 10 'Advertising and Sponsorship'.

- 5.9.1 The council can place advertisements where it will support audience reach. This might include paid-for advertising with third parties, as well as promotion on council property, vehicles, publications or other council assets, or those belonging to contracted or commissioned services. This should follow the principles of value for money where spend on advertising creates a direct return based on:
- The advert being the best method of reaching an audience for a defined purpose
 - As part of a combination of communication activities that has a target audience in mind
 - That the placing of adverts does not bring the authority into disrepute by association
 - That the style and content within adverts is cleared by the communications team
- 5.9.2 Herefordshire Council or a council sub-brand may use sponsorship as a method of communication and promotion. Where an activity or event is sponsored by the council this will be on the basis:
- A relevant organisation and service linked to specific campaigns and priorities
 - A political organisation or political association will not be sponsored
 - The sponsorship arrangements should be approved by the communication team to ensure it does not bring the council into disrepute
 - A sponsorship arrangement needs to ensure this does not constitute endorsement of the associated products or business
 - The service will need to check that there are no disputes outstanding with the company being sponsored.

For the full protocols on advertising and sponsorship, see section 10 'Advertising and Sponsorship'.

6 Media Protocols

6.1 The Communications Team will lead on the training and co-ordination of designated spokespeople (employees and members). The training will be updated and refreshed annually.

6.2 The following should apply as leading spokespeople:

- 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 Chairperson 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
- Chief Executive – on election or electoral registration issues or overview of the operation of the council
- Director and Assistant Director on service operational issues
- Manager or officer who has received training via the communications team (within the last 12 months) specifically relating to a service issue.

6.3 All local, national and trade or professional press calls should be directed to the communications team on 01432 260006 or emailed to pressoffice@herefordshire.gov.uk

6.4 The communications team will liaise with the journalist, maintain contact, liaise with service and identify suitable experts within Herefordshire Council, support spokespeople to make the best use of each opportunity to present the position of the council accurately, within tight deadlines. Although every effort will be made to meet media deadlines, the deadline should not be allowed to compromise the accuracy of the response.

6.5 Those approached by the Communications Team will receive an email from pressoffice@herefordshire.gov.uk and should respond to this email within 24 hours, so that press deadlines are met and that the reputation of the service and the organisation is protected. The Communications Team will log media enquiries and response times.

6.6 Where opportunities to pro-actively promote the council's work are identified the Communications Team will act as media liaison and identify the suitable spokesperson.

6.7 If Herefordshire Council discovers that it may be at fault in terms of the operation or delivery of its services or its internal processes, then it will, according to protocol and supported by the Communications Team, proactively tell the press and the public what has gone wrong and what it will do to put it right.

6.8 The value of integrity will be maintained. There are matters where Herefordshire Council should properly respect confidentiality, particularly where it has a duty of care, for example to service- users, employees, or elected members. In this instance, the council will decline to comment on matters raised by the Press.

6.9 Herefordshire Council will not discuss individual cases relating to personal health, social care issues, individual employment matters, or where there is an ongoing legal process/ombudsman investigation in, or with, the media. There may be other instances where information is withheld due to its commercial sensitivity. Where we are limited in what can be said to the media, we will aim to provide a reason why.

- 6.10 Herefordshire Council will not comment on information provided to the press anonymously or comment on quotes that will not be attributed. These anonymous comments can be inaccurate or malicious.
- 6.11 If the media is materially inaccurate in its reportage, the Communications Team will seek to correct misinformation, working with the publication or programme to seek a correction and a proportionate response.
- 6.12 Herefordshire Council will make committee meetings open to the press, encourage journalists to attend and offer good facilities for reporting these meetings. If previous media comment or reportage is discussed in public meetings, it should only help establish the facts and not overtly criticise members of the press.
- 6.13 The press are not permitted to enter restricted areas of Herefordshire Council premises or contracted service areas/ premises, unless officially invited to do so by a Director or a member of the Communications Team.
- 6.14 The Communications Team will always try to ensure that employees receive information that affects them as employees before they read about it in the media.
- 6.15 Herefordshire Council will operate a corporate approach to press relations. News releases and statements will be issued by the communications team and where suitable, posted to the Herefordshire Council website.
- 6.16 It is expected that the Media respect embargoed press releases, which will be clearly marked as embargoed with the date and time by which the release can be published.
- 6.17 Media queries will only be processed from official, regulated news channels. All general enquiries from social media channels and blogs will be treated as a customer enquiry and referred to the relevant service and/or through the FOI process.
- 6.18 Press releases and statements will include contact details of the Communications Officer who will co-ordinate the information and provide a response service to enquiries.
- 6.19 When responding to incoming media requests for interview on key media issues, designated spokespeople should, as far as is possible, make themselves available for interviews if required via the Communications Team.
- 6.20 Press releases containing financial or legal information will be checked by the designated finance or legal officer or a suitable senior manager. Press releases dependent on statistical information will be checked with the Strategic Intelligence Team to ensure the information is used accurately and objectively.
- 6.21 Directors will be offered the opportunity to approve key press releases (or if this is not possible for any reason, such as leave or being unobtainable before the press deadline, an alternative 'senior suitable' spokesperson will be consulted). The Head of Communications will approve all releases and maintain quality control on all press releases issued by the communications team.
- 6.22 When strategic partners (such as Balfour Beatty Living Places, Wye Valley Trust etc.) are featured or participating in a press release, then that partner will be consulted on content before release. Press releases will be shared in draft between partners and approved as with council press releases. Partners will be asked to agree in advance the method, manner and

timing of press releases. All strategic partners will receive a copy of finalised releases that may interest or refer to them.

6.23 The Communications Team will follow pre-election guidance and provide support to services to ensure communications comply with the guidance preceding elections. More information can be found in section 8 of this document 'Elections'.

6.24 The Communications Team will advise, support and monitor corporate communications for accessibility. The Communications Team will check the reading age of supplied text and ensure plain language is used in all promotional material, to help avoid jargon and technical language within corporate and service communications.

7 Legal framework and political dimension

For more information, please see section 9- Elections

7.1.1 A strict legal framework binds publicity or public statements issued by the council, which must operate within the *Local Government Act (1986)* and *The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity*.

7.1.2 The code defines the main functions of local authority publicity as follows: "To increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs; to allow local people 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."

7.1.3 The code covers the full range of publicity, including where it is used to comment on issues which are controversial, or where there are arguments for or against the views or policies of the council. The code states these issues should be handled with particular care and presented as clearly, fairly and as simply as possible.

7.1.4 The code states that where publicity is used to comment on the policies of central government, other local authorities or other public bodies, it should be 'objective, balanced, informative and accurate'. It should aim to set out the reasons for the council's views and should not be prejudiced, unreasoning or form a political attack on the policies or proposals in question or on the people putting them forward.

7.1.5 The code describes council leaflets or newsletters that are delivered unsolicited to all households as "inevitably more intrusive" than publicity available on application to the council, and states that particular care is required when drafting this kind of material. The code states that 'council publicity should never attack or appear to undermine generally accepted moral standards'. The codes of conduct for members and officers are also relevant.

7.1.6 The attribution of marketing, promotional and advertising materials that reach the public unsolicited should be clearly laid out. It should be clear that the council is responsible for the event or service, so the correct inclusion of the council's corporate branding is a prerequisite.

7.1.7 Publicity campaigns are appropriate in most circumstances. They can form part of consultation processes where local views are being sought, promote the effective and efficient use of local services and facilities, or influence public behaviour or attitudes on such matters as health, safety, crime prevention or equal opportunities. Publicity

campaigns can provide an appropriate means of ensuring that the local community is properly informed about a matter relating to a function of the local authority and about the authority's policies in relation to that function and the reasons for them. Local authorities, like other public 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.

- 7.1.8 When the council is negotiating a commercial transaction, officers or elected members will not weaken the council's position by disclosing it publicly or to the press. To do so would compromise a number of statutory obligations including the duty of care we have to council tax payers who rightly expect the council to protect its financial position. In these circumstances only the communications team, working with legal services, will talk to the press.
- 7.1.9 Employees or members must not betray the council's duty of care. Only the Communications Team, working with legal services, will talk to the press on issues in these circumstances. If this is not observed, it may result in disciplinary action in the case of officers, and a code of conduct investigation in the case of members. If an employee is subject to allegations or a disciplinary matter, the council will, or make arrangements to, investigate fully and fairly. If this involves suspension, this does not imply guilt. Only the communications team, working with legal services, will respond to press interest in these circumstances.
- 7.1.10 Case law has established that the public interest, and what interests the public, is not the same thing. The council has a duty to act in the public interest. The press may often be concerned with what interests the public. When these are in conflict, the council will always act in the public interest
- 7.1.11 Elected members have obligations both individually and collectively. If they breach the requirements of the *Members Code of Conduct* – for example by 'leaking' confidential information to the press or by bringing the council into disrepute – this may lead to referral to the council's monitoring officer, who will deal with the complaint.
- 7.1.12 There is a general prohibition on local authorities producing "party political publicity". Section 2 of the Local Government Act (1988) prohibits local authorities publishing any material which in whole, or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party. Also councils should never use advertising as a means of giving financial support to any publication that could be associated with a political party. Publicity should reflect the tradition of a politically -impartial service, and the fact that local authority staff are expected to serve the authority as a whole, whatever its composition from time to time.
- 7.1.13 A Communications Officer will be assigned to cover the activities of the cabinet and full council, attending each meeting and offering communications advice as well as planning and agreeing press releases.
- 7.1.14 The Communications Team will aim to ensure that the release of news to the media at least accompanies the distribution of papers for meetings where there is likely to be press interest.
- 7.1.15 Publicity about individual members may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the council (for example, member of the cabinet) and their responsibilities. All publicity should be approved by the member prior to release. Publicity may include information about individual members' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is

relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and whilst it may acknowledge the part played by individual members as holders of particular positions in the council, personalisation of issues or personal image making should be avoided.

7.1.16 Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor which are relevant to her/his position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward her/his justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular political party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals.

7.1.17 The Communications Team will seek legal clearance where appropriate for any issues that may be contentious, subject to a legal dispute, or part of a regulatory process.

8 Social media

8.1 The Communications Team will maintain a list of approved Community Managers and the social media channel they are responsible for. A full audit and on-going regulation will be implemented to help ensure the quality of information and to mitigate risk. Only those who have completed training on the approved social media channel may communicate on behalf of the council.

8.2 No individual or service area may undertake a social media account as representing a service area of or representing as Herefordshire Council, without prior agreement and briefing from the Communications Team.

8.3 The Communications Team will monitor corporate social media channels and if a question or an issue is raised by the public that Herefordshire Council should answer, then the Communications Team will work with the appropriate service area to facilitate a response.

8.4 Service areas that wish to manage a social media account will need to submit: A business case; background information; and a commitment to the best practice guide for social media community management to help support the application. There will also need to be resource committed to regular management and monitoring of the account, to ensure there is no reputational impact on the council or its services. These will be reviewed and determined jointly by the communications team and information governance team. Accounts managed by partners are subject to the same quality assurance.

8.5 Service areas that are successful in their application for a service-level social media account will be subject to mandatory annual refresher training organised by the communication team.

8.6 The Communications Team and all social media managers will use plain language and avoid jargon and technical language.

8.7 Herefordshire Council may not comment on information on social media that is deemed to be posted anonymously.

8.8 Usage of social media accounts will be monitored by the communications team. Any individual's access to specific platforms or services may be suspended as part of a performance management or disciplinary process. Reference is made to the employee code of conduct, which also applies to online. Accounts managed by partners are subject to the same quality assurance.

8.9 An employee must not bring the council into disrepute via their social media activity (part of or outside of work).

9 Elections

- 9.1 Communications during the run-up to elections may be particularly sensitive and there are restrictions contained within the Code of Conduct on Local Publicity. To ensure the continued political impartiality of Herefordshire Council the restrictions on communications apply also to national elections. The same extent of control does not apply to by-elections. Subject to compliance with the code of conduct, publicity about individual members who are not involved in the by-election is permitted (although great care should be taken in the managing of local issues that could be influential in a by-election).
- 9.2 The period of restriction in question usually relates to the day when formal notice of a local or national election is given, up to and including the day of the election – this is known as the pre-election period and guidance is issued by the council on each occasion and published on the councils' website.
- 9.3 Any local authority is prohibited from publishing any material that appears to be designed to affect support, positively or negatively, for a political party.
- 9.4 Careful consideration should be given to the style, content, timing of material and the likely effect it will have on the audience. Material is prohibited if:
- It refers to a political party of a person identified with a political party
 - It promotes or opposes a point of view on a question of political debate or controversy
 - It supports a view or issue identifiable as the view of one political party and not of another
 - It identifies with individual elected members or groups of members
 - It is part of a campaign associated with a political view
 - It contains quotes from politicians outside of the council, such as members of parliament, who are clearly identified as part of a political party.
- 9.5 Consideration also applies to proactive events, organised by Herefordshire Council which should not involve elected members or political candidates during this period.
- 9.6 During the run up to a local or national election, communications and marketing can continue as follows:
- It is acceptable for the Communications Team, on behalf of the council, to distribute press releases and respond to legitimate service enquiries provided the content is factual and not party political. The safest option is for press releases not to quote elected members during this period and particularly not members or individuals standing for election.
 - It is admissible for elected members of the council holding key positions to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the authority's control.
- 9.7 Publications can continue as long as content is neutral and takes account of the restrictions outlined above. Sometimes long lead-in times associated with such publications can pose an extra challenge. It should be remembered that it is the time of publication, not the time when the content is drafted, that is most crucial.
- 9.8 Electronic communication also comes into scope. Any material posted on social media, intranet or website during the period is subject to restrictions.
- 9.9 Consultation should not be undertaken on issues that could be seen as politically sensitive.

- 9.10 All these restrictions apply to other organisations that receive local authority funding and officers should check with community groups they fund and with third sector organisations that may be planning publicity around election time.
- 9.11 In general the question to ask of all publications, documents or events is; 'can it wait?' And if not, 'will the subject matter be regarded as influential on voting behaviour?' This will be the case with controversial subjects and needs to be avoided altogether.
- 9.12 If an elected member asks an employee of the council to publish something that the employee considers to be inappropriate or is against communications protocols, the concerns need to be raised with legal services and the Communications Team. If something cannot be distributed as a member has suggested then the employee should explain why and offer an alternative form of words. Guidance and support is available from the Communications Team.
- 9.13 If the document has a high corporate profile or deals with a strategic issue then the Chief Executive or a Director should clear the final version.

10 Advertising and Sponsorship

- 10.1 The Communications Team will be responsible for the management of corporate advertising and identifying and measuring the opportunity set against the risk. All advertising should ensure compliance with legislation, advertising industry codes and other council policies (for further details visit www.asa.org.uk/asa/codes). A third party may advertise with Herefordshire Council or sponsor a particular campaign, event or asset. Opportunities should be suitably advertised so that other providers have an equal opportunity to provide support. In that instance this should consider:
- Upholding the council's reputation and corporate identity
 - Link to the council's priorities
 - Secure best value for money and maximise income
 - Safeguard the image and environment of the county.
- 10.2 The council will accept advertising and sponsorship on its own platforms that supports its priorities.
- 10.3 The council will not permit any advertising or sponsorship that represents a conflict of interest or is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. Particular care should be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, age, religion, sex, sexual orientation or disability. Content that is not permitted for advertising includes, but is not limited to, advertising that contains, infers or suggests any of the following:
- Advocacy of, or opposition to, any politically, environmentally or socially controversial subjects or issues
 - Disparagement or promotion of any person or class of persons
 - Promotion or incitement of illegal, violent or socially undesirable acts
 - Promotion or availability of tobacco products, weapons, gambling or illegal drugs
 - Advertising of financial organisations and loan advancers with punitive interest rates
 - Promotion or availability of adult or sexually orientated entertainment materials
 - Advertising that infringes on any trademark, copyright or patent rights of another company
 - Claims or representations in violation of advertising or consumer protection laws
 - Promotion of any political party.

- 10.4 The council abides by the Town and Country Planning Act. The control of Advertisements Regulations provides rules on displaying advertising. The council has the duty to ensure all advertising on council owned platforms falls within this legislation and will liaise with the appropriate authority/district council to ensure planning law relating to the display of advertisements is complied with.
- 10.5 The council will advertise its own services and offers as appropriate using its own platforms. This may include adverts relating to traded services or services which generate an income, or linked to a campaign. These should be identified and reviewed in collaboration with the communications team.
- 10.6 The council holds personal data of service users and careful consideration needs to be given to whether it is appropriate and legal (General Data Protection Regulations) for this to be used for any advertising or direct marketing purposes. All audiences should be asked whether they are willing to 'opt in' to receive news, information or advertising messages from the council when personal data is gathered. More guidance is available from the Access to Information team.
- 10.7 All advertising and sponsorship agreements should be recorded in the contracts register.
- 10.8 Advertising and sponsorship is not a way for any company or organisation to be viewed favourably by the council in any other business arrangements they might be a party to. Herefordshire Council will monitor and publish all information on advertising and sponsorship opportunities and income.
- 10.9 The council can place advertisements where it will support audience reach. This might include paid-for advertising with third parties, as well as promotion on council property, vehicles, publications or other council assets, or on those belonging to contracted or commissioned services. However, any such advertising must be conducted in line with the principles set out in section 10.1 above.
- 10.10 Herefordshire Council or a council sub-brand may use sponsorship as a method of communication and promotion for an event or activity. Where an activity or event is sponsored by the council this will be in line with the advertising principles set out in section 10.1 above. In addition, to this, the Council reserves the right to verify that the sponsorship complies with the following principles:
- Originates from a relevant organisation or service linked to specific campaigns and priorities
 - Does not result in sponsoring or promoting any political organisation or political association
 - The sponsorship arrangements will be approved by the communication team to ensure it does not bring the council into disrepute
 - A sponsorship arrangement needs to ensure this does not constitute endorsement of the associated products or business
 - The service will need to check that there are no disputes outstanding with the company being sponsored

For further information on the topics within this document, please contact the Head of Communications.