

North Yorkshire Council Protocol for Official Press Releases

Members and Officers should be aware that in accordance with The Code of Practice issued under the Local Government Act 1986, the Council is explicitly forbidden from using:

"Public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy".

The main purpose therefore of all Council produced press releases and publicity materials* is to increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs; to explain to electors and Council Tax payers the reasons for particular policies and priorities; and, in general, to improve local accountability. It is very important, therefore, that Councillors and Officers ensure that they do not contravene this requirement.

To assist in this process, the following Protocol has been agreed. This should be read in conjunction with the Protocol for Member/Officer Relations and any relevant internal communications guidance documents.

- (a) All press releases and related publicity material should be managed through the corporate Communications Team with the exception of any statutory public notices.
- (b) Press releases and marketing activity should generally be objective at all times, concentrating on facts or explanation or both. It is the responsibility of the relevant Corporate Director to ensure that this is achieved and a copy of the draft press release will be provided by the author to the Corporate Director.
- (c) Where materials are produced to comment on or respond to policies and proposals of central government, other local authorities or other public authorities, the comment or response needs to be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. In setting out the reasons for the Council's views, the material should not be constructed in such a way as to be seen as a prejudiced, political attack.
- (d) A press release can contain a statement from a relevant Officer, the Leader of the Council, the Executive portfolio holder, or Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chair, Chairs or Vice-Chairs of Committees, Chair of a properly constituted working party** or Chair of an Area Committee. If a press release relates to a matter which affects only one electoral division, a local Member could, if they so wished, be quoted when the quote supports or endorses the policies of the Council.
- (e) Contact details of Executive Members and their portfolio responsibilities and those relevant Overview and Scrutiny Members and opposition party spokespersons will be maintained and published on the Council's website, and provided by the Communications Team to media contacts on request.
- (f) A press release quoting the Chair of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be agreed by the Chair and the statutory Scrutiny Support Officer (as the subject matter expert) and, provided that it can be achieved without delay that would reduce the effectiveness of the press release, by the Vice-Chair. The press release should seek to represent the Council's arrangements for scrutiny in a positive light and as a constructive process of internal debate.

- (g) The Council may, from time to time, nominate an elected Member as a "Champion" for a particular issue or interest group - such as historic environment or older people. It is to be expected that such Members would, from time to time, want to put out a press release on issues relevant to their role. The content of such press releases must accord with Council policy and to this end the "Champion" Member should consult with the relevant Executive Member and Corporate Director before the release is issued. The nominated Corporate Director is responsible for making arrangements for the final approval of the press release in consultation with the Communications Team.
- (h) Other Members of the Council cannot be quoted, either within press releases or related publicity material other than in exceptional circumstances or where they represent the Council or an outside body or partnership. They have the ability to issue their own materials directly to the press. If a Member wishes to issue a press release on any subject personally, then they should do so in their own name, and not as a member of the Executive, or of any Committee of the Council. References to Members of the Council in press releases must refer to them in their role as Councillors, unless there are exceptional circumstances, in any particular instance, why it would be to the benefit of the Council for that Member to be referred to in any other role they might fulfil.
- (i) The Council **is** prohibited from using its resources to promote a particular political view. Consequently the period leading up to elections is very sensitive and it is the policy to stop quoting elected Members in Council press releases issued in the period from the date of notice of election to polling day, inclusive. This will apply to all Members regardless of political party with the exception of the Chair, or Vice-Chair in their absence, who represents the Council as a whole.
- (j) Council press releases will be circulated to all Members and to relevant Officers named in the release on the day they are issued. All releases will be placed on the Council's website.

The Head of Communications is responsible for ensuring overall compliance with this Protocol and all it entails. Any dispute will be referred to the Assistant Chief Executive for Local Engagement, who, in turn, will consult with the Chief Executive Officer before giving a decision, and the relevant Member/Officer will be made aware of any amendments made.

* means written material containing information on Council services and produced by the Council.

** means as established in accordance with the Constitution.