



## Cabinet Resources

### 30 June 2015

<b>Report title</b>	Media Protocol
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor Roger Lawrence Public Relations
<b>Key decision</b>	No
<b>In forward plan</b>	No
<b>Wards affected</b>	All
<b>Accountable director</b>	Keith Ireland, Managing Director
<b>Originating service</b>	Corporate Communication
<b>Accountable employee(s)</b>	Ian Fegan Tel: 01902 554286 Job title: Head of Corp Comms Email: <a href="mailto:ian.fegan@wolverhampton.gov.uk">ian.fegan@wolverhampton.gov.uk</a> . Kevin O'Keefe Tel: 01902 554910 Job title: Director of Governance Email: <a href="mailto:kevin.o'keefe@wolverhampton.gov.uk">kevin.o'keefe@wolverhampton.gov.uk</a>
<b>Report to be/has been considered by</b>	SEB, 19 May 2015 Leadership Teams, SEB 19 May, Executive Team 3 June 2015

---

#### **Recommendation(s) for action or decision:**

Cabinet Resources is recommended to:

- Review and approve the city council's proposed new media protocol

## **1.0 Purpose**

- 1.1 Effective communication between the City of Wolverhampton Council and its many stakeholder groups is crucial to the success of the Corporate Plan. It is also essential if the council is to raise awareness of the benefits of the services it provides, encourage greater participation in decision-making and inform people about how public money is being spent.
- 1.2 The protocol aims to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach to dealing with the local, regional and national media. It aims to clarify the responsibilities of city council employees and elected councillors. It does not aim to stifle dialogue and debate, particularly given the role democratically elected local councillors have as the representatives of the communities they serve.
- 1.3 The protocol is split into three sections:
  - The roles and responsibilities of councillors and employees in dealing with the media
  - A brief overview of how media relations are managed within the council
  - The professional support available from the corporate communications team and contact details.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 The traditional media / press play an important role in civic society. As a 'critical friend' they challenge the decisions the council makes and hold the organisation to account for its decisions and actions. However, they also have an important role in keeping communities informed about the work of the city council and helping to improve life for local people by raising awareness, perception-busting and helping to change behaviour.
- 2.2 Social media is also a critical tool in helping the council achieve its corporate objectives. It is increasingly used by journalists as a way of contacting organisations. Guidance on effective use of social media can be found in the city council's separate *social media policy*.

## **3.0 Current position**

- 3.1 There is currently no documented media protocol in place to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach across the council.

## **4.0 Option for discussion**

- 4.1 A draft media protocol is set out in **Appendix one** below.

## **5.0 Financial implications**

- 5.1 The Media Protocol is part of the Future Practice work stream. The C3 programme is intended to deliver transformation, improve efficiency and the increase the quality of services and will, therefore, directly contribute towards the delivery of the Medium Term Financial Strategy, including challenging savings requirements.  
[GE/27052015/X]

## **6.0 Legal implications**

- 6.1 There are no legal implications.[Legal Code: TS/27052015/G]

## **7.0 Equalities implications**

- 7.1 There are no equalities implications.

## **8.0 Environmental implications**

- 8.1 There are no environmental implications.

## **9.0 Human resources implications**

- 9.1 There are no HR implications.

## **10.0 Corporate landlord implications**

- 10.1 Not applicable

## **11.0 Schedule of background papers**

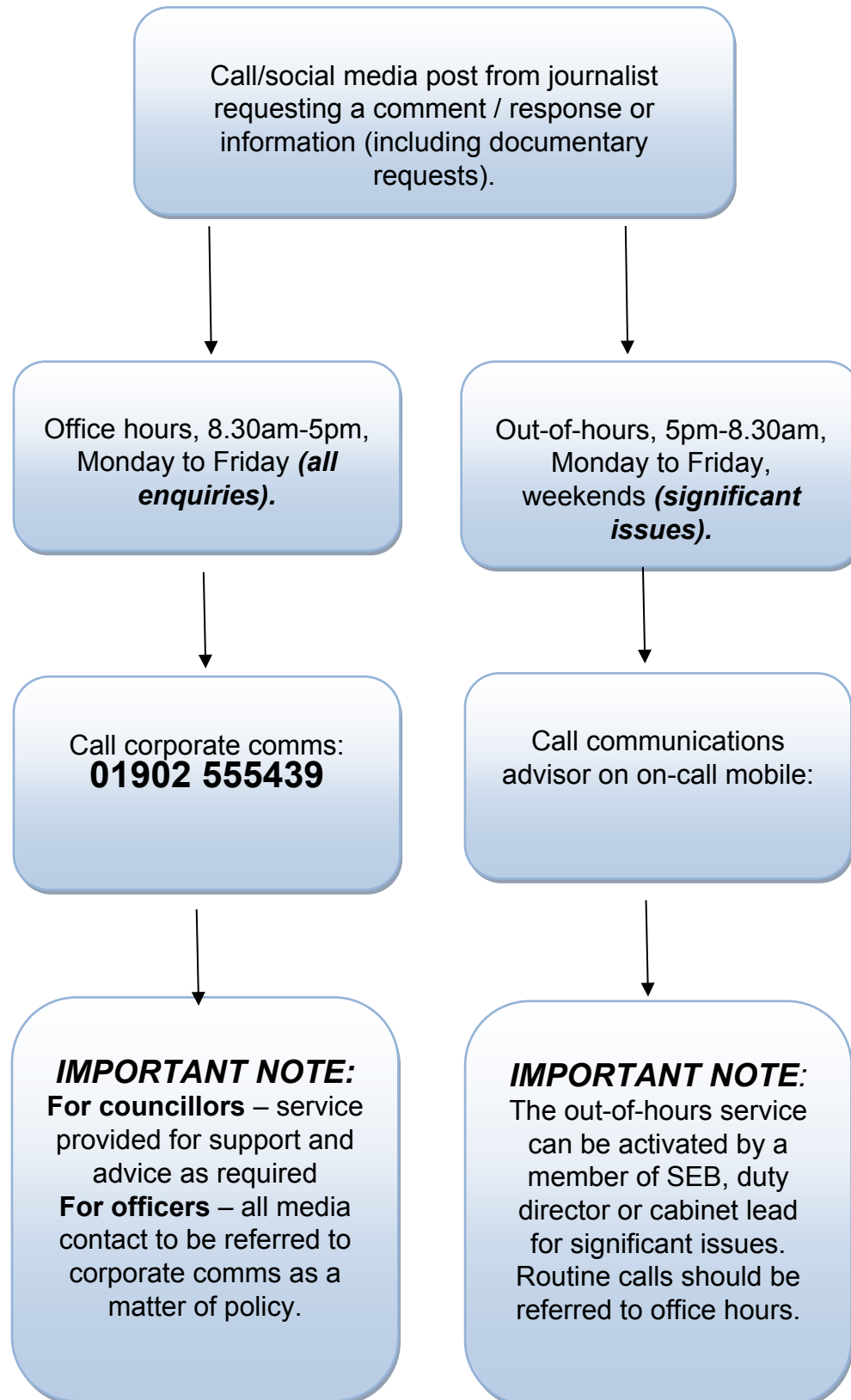
- 11.1 Not applicable



**Dealing with the media: roles and responsibilities, June 2015  
<DRAFT>**

Author:	Ian Fegan, Head of Corporate Communication
SEB Lead	Keith Ireland, Managing Director

## 1. Quick guide



## 2. Introduction

Effective communication between Wolverhampton City Council and its many stakeholder groups is crucial to the success of our Corporate Plan. It is also essential if we are to raise awareness of the benefits of the services we provide, encourage greater participation in decision-making and inform people about how we are spending public money.

The traditional media / press play an important role in civic society. As a 'critical friend' they challenge the decisions we make and hold us to account for our actions. However, they also have an important role in keeping communities informed about the work of the city council and helping to improve life for local people by raising awareness, perception-busting and helping to change behaviour. Social media is a critical tool in helping us achieve our corporate objectives. It is also increasingly used by journalists as a way of contacting organisations. Guidance on effective use of social media can be found in the city council's separate *social media policy*.

This protocol aims to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach to dealing with the local, regional and national media. It aims to clarify the responsibilities of city council employees and elected councillors. It does not aim to stifle dialogue and debate, particularly given the role democratically elected local councillors have as the representatives of the communities they serve. The protocol is split into three sections:

- The roles and responsibilities of councillors and employees in dealing with the media
- A brief overview of how media relations are managed within the council
- The professional support available from the corporate communications team and contact details.

## 3. The roles and responsibilities of councillors and employees

### 3.1 Elected councillors

The city council is keen to take every opportunity to inform stakeholders and positively promote the work of the council.

As democratically elected representatives, cabinet members are the key spokespeople for the council in all communications activity and will lead on issues relating to their portfolio. As a general guide:

- The Leader is the main spokesperson on national and local issues and cross-cutting policies. The Deputy Leader is also available to speak in the absence of the Leader
- Cabinet members are spokespeople for the council on their respective portfolios
- Other leading councillors (such as scrutiny chairs, planning and licensing chairs/vice chairs) can speak on issues within their own areas of remit and expertise
- The Mayor is the spokesperson on all matters of a civic or ceremonial nature.

In those rare circumstances where a cabinet member is unavailable to speak on behalf of the council or clear a quote, employees can speak (see also 3.2 below) and/or clear quotes. This decision must be taken with a member of the corporate communications team.

All statements and news releases should be initially approved by a senior officer and then cleared by the relevant cabinet lead.

The city council is also keen to avoid quotes being attributed to a nameless spokesperson. Where a quote or statement is needed to respond to a specific enquiry and it is inappropriate to attribute the quote to a councillor, then a senior officer should be named. There may be occasions however where the media still attributes the quote to a spokesperson.

Wherever possible and appropriate, councillors should brief the corporate communications team on any media enquiries they deal with *directly*. This helps ensure a consistent and coordinated approach when dealing with issues that have wider organisational or reputational impact. Communication officers are then in a position to deal more effectively and efficiently with follow-up enquiries from other journalists and better support councillors.

### **3.2 Employees**

In relation to more specialist, technical or operational information, employees are also important spokespeople for the City of Wolverhampton Council. In these circumstances, it is expected that senior officers – strategic directors/service directors and heads of service - will usually conduct media interviews. This will normally take place, wherever possible, following discussion with the relevant cabinet member.

Any officer who is contacted directly by the media without advance knowledge, agreement or preparation must immediately redirect the call to the corporate communications team (contact details can be found at the end of this document). This includes all documentary filming requests.

As a general rule, in order to protect yourself and the reputation of the city council, employees should not be speaking to the media without advance notice, agreement or preparation. No employee should ever:

- Publicise confidential information gained in the course of their work
- Bring the council into disrepute by the extremity of their views.

Employees should also be aware of the strict rules on impartiality and publicity that apply to their work as officers (not in relation to them in a private capacity). Practically this means that in their work they are not allowed to enter into any form of communication that supports or promotes, or may be interpreted as supporting or promoting, the political views of any councillor or group of councillors.

For certain senior posts which are politically restricted, this restriction also means that in their private capacities they must not enter into any communication that could be criticised in this way.

## **4. A brief overview of how we deal with the media**

### **4.1 Media enquiries**

On average the council's communication team deals with around 3 - 4,000 media enquiries a year. To effectively demonstrate openness and transparency, that we are a confident, capable

council and to manage the reputation of the council, it is essential that every effort is made to respond to media enquiries as quickly as possible and meet their deadlines. The proliferation of 24-hour news channels, blogs and social media means that a damaging news story can have a significant impact on public confidence and be broadcast to a national or even international audience within minutes. Rapid responses are vital to safeguard reputation, and may be accompanied by other targeted stakeholder communication using other channels.

As a bare minimum all media enquiries should be responded to within 24 hours unless an extended deadline is given. For daily papers or broadcast media, councillors and officers will be expected to approve responses to the deadlines given, and in instances that seriously threaten the city council's reputation, should make it a priority to approve responses to help mitigate reputational damage.

Reporters will not be directed to submit Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to access information that is readily available, except in the very rare occasion that the scale and complexity of the enquiry calls for additional time.

*Ideally, no story should be broadcast or printed without a comment from the city council.*

## **4.2 Media interviews**

All interview requests, including participation in documentaries (see 4.5 below), should come through the communications team.

In response to interview requests, councillors are always given the first opportunity to speak. If they are not available or they agree that an officer would be more appropriate then again it is expected that senior officers will handle media interviews, supported by the corporate communications team. Other officers, with the agreement of their respective strategic director/service director or head of service, can also undertake interviews. It is advised that anyone speaking on our behalf should have some form of media training, which can be organised by the corporate communications team.

## **4.3 News Releases**

News releases are one of the tools – but not the only tool - we use to disseminate information to the media. Council news releases can only be distributed by the communications team who will ensure that they contain:

- Factual information i.e. what is happening, where, how much, implications, etc.
- Quotes, usually from a cabinet member and if required an officer, although we may also include quotes from partners, businesses or local people wherever relevant
- Wherever possible, an appropriate photo will be circulated with the news release or a photo opportunity organised.

All news releases should be initially approved by a senior officer and then cleared by the relevant cabinet lead.

News releases are emailed to appropriate distribution lists, published on the council's website and – dependent upon the audience – promoted on corporate social media sites.



The corporate communications team ensures that resources are used to promote and explain the policies and actions of the council as a whole. It is not appropriate for the corporate communications team to promote views of individual councillors that are not the views of the council as a whole.

If we are issuing or participating in a joint news release with our partners we will ensure the following:

- The City of Wolverhampton Council's role or contribution is identified appropriately and the release includes quotes from named councillors or officers
- The content of the news release includes key corporate messages linking our activity to our Corporate Plan priorities
- The draft text of the news release is shown and approved by the relevant cabinet member and officers
- The method, manner and timing of distribution are agreed in advance with the relevant communications officer.

If the city council commissions an organisation or partner to provide services on its behalf, that organisation must share and approve any news release or activity relating to that work with the communications team, who will also consider whether or not to include a quote. For major projects or partnerships, a separate communications or media protocol may be agreed and followed.

#### **4.4 Statements**

Generally statements are issued to communicate the city council's position on a specific issue. They should therefore be short and to the point. They should be attributed to a named person, either a cabinet lead or senior operational officer as appropriate. All statements should be approved initially by a senior officer and then cleared finally by the relevant cabinet lead. In certain instances, these statements may form the basis of wider stakeholder communication, for example to our employees on City People.

#### **4.5 Documentary requests**

All documentary requests need to be referred to the corporate communications team for initial assessment and evaluation at the earliest opportunity. Any decision to get involved in regional or national documentaries needs to support the council's core priorities and will ultimately need to be authorised by the senior executive board (SEB) and the Leader *prior* to any formal agreement with producers to take part.

#### **4.6 Briefing and alerting councillors and officers**

Where possible, the communication team will alert senior councillors and managers to emerging media issues. On issues that if not handled promptly and professionally could undermine public confidence, the matter will be escalated to the appropriate Strategic Director, Cabinet Member and/or Leader as soon as possible. The circulation list for these alerts will be dependent on the topic, however as a guide it should include:

- The Leader
- The Deputy Leader
- Relevant Cabinet Member

- Local Councillor (if the issues involves somewhere/ someone in their ward)
- Managing Director
- Relevant Director/Service Director
- Any other officers directly involved
- The Head of Communications
- Communication Advisors
- Head of Customer Services.

Where appropriate, this may include The Leader of the Opposition, with prior agreement of the Managing Director, Leader or relevant cabinet member, for example in the event of a natural disaster or emergency situation.

#### **4.7 Out of hours contact**

Members of the communications team are available between 8.30am – 5pm, Monday to Fridays for all media enquiries, advice and information.

For urgent media enquiries and support outside of these hours relating to significant issues please contact the on-call communications advisor (see the flowchart at section one above for how to do this).

#### **4.8 Elections**

As a general rule, proactive publicity will be kept to an absolute minimum during election periods.

It is not appropriate for the corporate communications team to quote elected councillors in any materials during the run up to elections (the period following publication of candidates' names), until the day after the election. During this 'purdah' period quotes will be attributable to officers.

It is not appropriate to allow council-owned premises to be used for broadcast media interviews with politicians during the run-up to elections. This is to avoid any impression of favouritism on the part of the council towards the interviewee. For more guidance on media and communication during the pre-election or 'purdah' period, see **Appendix one** below.

#### **4.9 Forward planning**

As well as the briefings which will take place under 4.6 above, the communications team will also deliver a weekly briefing to the Leader and Deputy Leader on media and communications for the fortnight ahead.

#### **4.10 Media monitoring service**

The communications team will provide a weekly media monitoring service and emailed monthly report. These will include the headline, overview and sentiment of each article. A quarterly dashboard will also be produced and distributed to senior councillors and officers showing coverage by corporate priority and source of coverage (proactive vs reactive).

## 5. Support available to you

Help dealing with media enquiries is available from the city council's corporate communication team based on the second floor of the Civic Centre. The team is responsible for distributing all news releases, responding to all media enquiries, evaluating the impact of publicity and facilitating media training for elected councillors and officers.

A member of the communications team will also attend Cabinet and full Council meetings to provide support and facilitate dealing with the media.

The corporate communications team will deliver a pre-agreed work-plan for the year consisting of integrated communications campaigns that will support the city council deliver on its priorities. This includes a proactive approach to media relations.

A concise media interview training session, which includes role play scenarios and live interview recording and feedback, will be provided to appropriate officers.

Practical advice and support is also offered to schools and other city partners, particularly in times of difficulty/crisis or success. This could involve general media guidance, checking news releases, fielding media calls or helping to write statements.

### 5.1 Contact details:

A senior member of the corporate communication team can be contacted on **01902 555439**. Alternatively, you can contact individual team members on the numbers below:

Tim Clark, Principal Communication Advisor, 01902 554076, [tim.clark@wolverhampton.gov.uk](mailto:tim.clark@wolverhampton.gov.uk)

Paul Brown, Communication Advisor, 01902 555497, [paul.brown@wolverhampton.gov.uk](mailto:paul.brown@wolverhampton.gov.uk)

Shelley Jones, Communication Advisor, 01902 551139, [shelley.jones@wolverhampton.gov.uk](mailto:shelley.jones@wolverhampton.gov.uk)

Out of office hours, for major and critical issues, the on-call communications advisor can be contacted.

If you have any questions about the content of this protocol or require further clarification please contact Ian Fegan, Head of Corporate Communications, 01902 554286  
[ian.fegan@wolverhampton.gov.uk](mailto:ian.fegan@wolverhampton.gov.uk)

## 6. Evaluation and review

This protocol will be reviewed every two years through the Senior Executive Board (SEB) or before-hand should this be required due to local or national developments.

## **Appendix one: Pre-election (purdah) guidance on communications**

### **Introduction**

This document is based on LGA guidance. It includes frequently asked questions and other key points to provide assistance to senior officers, communications team staff and councillors on how to handle communication during the pre-election period of heightened political sensitivity.

### **1. Do we shut-down completely during purdah?**

Communications does not have to shut down completely during purdah. The ordinary functions of the council should continue, but some restrictions apply, by law, to publicity involving all councillors and officers.

### **2. Is pre-election period a legal requirement or just for guidance?**

Pre-election restrictions are governed by Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, as amended in 1988. Essentially councils should **“not publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.”**

Section 4 of the Act makes clear that councils need to have regard for the code of recommended practice that supports the Act. A new code of practice was published in 2011 which replaced all previous guidance.

### **3. What are the restrictions that apply?**

The essential points from the 2011 code are:

- in general you should not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters
- do not publish any publicity on controversial issues
- do not report views on proposals in a way which identifies them with individual councillors or groups of councillors
- consider suspending hosting third party material or closing public forums if these are likely to breach the codes of practice.
- publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published unless expressly authorised by statute.
- you are allowed to publish factual information which identifies the names, wards and parties of candidates at elections
- do not make references to individual politicians or groups in press releases or for content on any other communication channels
- do not arrange proactive media or events involving candidates or standing councillors
- do not issue or publish photographs which include candidates or standing councillors

- do not supply council photographs or other materials to councillors or political group staff unless you have verified that they will not be used for campaigning purposes (this would involve using public money/resources to support a particular candidate or party)
- do not host third party blogs or e-communications
- do not republish comments/views from politicians, for instance by retweeting or sharing social media posts
- do not help with national political visits (as this would involve using public money to support a particular candidate or party). These should be organised by political parties with no cost or resource implications for the council.
- do not launch any new consultations. Unless it is a statutory duty, don't start any new consultations or publish report findings from consultation exercises, which could be politically sensitive
- in terms of ongoing campaigns, you should always think carefully if a campaign could be deemed likely to influence the outcome of the election and you should not use councillors in press releases and events in pre-election periods. In such cases you should stop or defer them. An example might be a campaign on an issue which has been subject of local political debate and/or disagreement.

## 5. So what exactly what can we do?

- We continue to discharge normal council business (including determining planning applications, even if they are controversial).
- Stick to publishing factual information to counteract misleading, controversial or extreme (for example, racist/sexist information). An example might be a media story which is critical of the council, such as a media enquiry claiming that the salaries of all the council's senior managers have increased by five per cent. If this is not true, a response such as 'none of the council's senior management team have received any increase in salary in the last 12 months' is acceptable. It is perfectly right and proper that the council responds, **as long as it is factual**.
- Use relevant senior, lead officers rather than cabinet members or other councillors for reactive media releases
- Use a politician who is involved in an election when the council is required to respond in particular circumstances, such as in an emergency situation or where there is a genuine need for a member-level response to an important event beyond the council's control. Normally this would be the civic mayor (as opposed to the elected mayor in those areas with elected mayors) or chairman (that is, someone holding a politically neutral role). If the issue is so serious, it is worth considering asking the council's group leaders to agree to a response which would involve all of them.
- Continue to run campaign material to support your own local campaigns. If the campaign is already running and is non-controversial (for example, on issues like recycling or foster care) and would be a waste of public money to cancel or postpone them, then continue.

## 6. What's covered by publicity? Is it just the media?

Publicity is defined as “**any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public.**” We would therefore have to apply the code of practice to

our work with the media, on social media and other digital channels, events and internal communications.

### **7. Is there a guiding principle I can apply if I have a tricky situation?**

A good test is to ask yourself 'could a reasonable person conclude that you were spending public money to influence the outcome of the election?' In other words it must pass the 'is it reasonable' test. Ultimately, you must always be guided by the principle of fairness. It is crucial that any decision you take would be seen as fair and reasonable by the public and those standing for office.

### **8. What if I issue a news release to the local paper before purdah but they decide to hold off printing the story until after purdah?**

In the week before purdah we should include a guidance note to reporters and editors, along with a second, officer-led version of the original news release, to ensure that they are aware of the restrictions that apply from the official notification of the pre-election period:

Note to reporters / editors: From 30 March 2015, Wolverhampton City Council will be subject to pre-election restrictions as governed by Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, as amended in 1988. This sets out that we should "not publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party." If you intend to publish this news release after 30 March 2015, please use the alternative, version provided with quotes attributable to senior officers and not elected members. Thank you for your cooperation and understanding.

### **9. Who can I ask for advice and guidance?**

The head of corporate communications should be the first point of contact and they can then escalate issues to the council's director of governance.

Ends