

Communications Protocols and Policies Report March 22 2016

Report to: **West Devon Borough Council Hub Committee**

Date: **22 March 2016**

Title: **Communications Protocols and Policies**

Portfolio Area: **Communications**

Wards Affected: **All**

Relevant Scrutiny Committee:

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: Y

Date next steps can be taken:
(e.g. referral on of recommendation or implementation of substantive decision)

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Recommendations:

That the Hub RECOMMEND to Council that:-

1. the joint Communications and Social Media Policies (as attached at Appendix A) be adopted for West Devon Borough Council; and
2. the protocols in the revised Communications protocol January 2016 be acknowledged and adopted.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Currently the joint Communications Team for South Hams and West Devon do not have an adopted Communications or Social Media

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Policy or a protocol document setting out how the Councils should communicate with their audiences.

- 1.2 Good Local Authority communication should be open and transparent, fair and lawful and these protocol and policies will enable the Communications Team to support the Officers and Members to ensure that this happens.
- 1.3 All of our communications activities are governed by the Local Government Acts 1972 and 1986 as well as the updated Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity published in March 2011.
- 1.4 These documents provides us with a framework to ensure proper use of public funds for publicity in accordance with the code.
- 1.5 Good communication is the responsibility of all of the employed Officers and elected Members of both Councils; all of their activities are underpinned and supported by the shared Communications Team whose primary function is to communicate the business of the Councils and these policies and protocols will give them the framework through which to work.

2. Background

- 2.1 It is considered best practice to have one central point of control for all communication activities and this function is run by the Communications Team.
- 2.2 To ensure consistency of message and to minimise risk to our reputation and increase the understanding of our messages to all our audiences, this Communications Protocol and associated policies sets out how both Councils will interact with the media, the public and Officers.
- 2.3 It contains the guidelines for best practice from the communications industry and the government, and notes the laws which govern what we do and how we operate.
- 2.4 Without these protocols and policies in place there is the risk that we will not engage with our residents, our messages will get confused and our reputation will suffer.

3. Outcomes/outputs

- 3.1 These protocols and policies will enable us to reinforce and communicate the vision, themes and objectives of the Council in the best possible way using all of the channels at our disposal in line with best practice and the law.

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4. Options available and consideration of risk

- 4.1 The protocols and policies included have been written with knowledge from some of the country's best advisors on best practice in local government communications.
- 4.2 This includes the latest thinking on some of the changing technology and how we can embrace all new media channels while abiding by the law and protecting our reputation. Having consulted with Officers and elected Members, there is an urgent need to put some guidelines in place for communications which would enable Officers to have a framework in which to operate, and particularly with social media, to give them the confidence to know they are not going to do anything wrong.
- 4.3 There have also been a few instances recently where information and stories have appeared in the press, which have not been very helpful for Officers and Members as the information supplied by an individual has not been correct.
- 4.4 By coming through the Communications Team, we can ensure that this doesn't happen, and these policies and protocols will enable us to do this.
- 4.5 The need to have these policy and protocol frameworks in place is particularly important in times of emergency, when the Communications Team will have to respond to a situation quickly and accurately. With a framework in place for everyone to adhere to in a time of emergency we can ensure that the messages given out to the public will be clear, accurate and appropriate.
- 4.6 **Best Practice guides:**
Local Government Communications resources:
<http://www.lgcomms.org.uk/resources/resource-library>
- 4.7 **Local government Association:**
<http://www.local.gov.uk/communications-support>
- 4.8 **Government Communication Service Guidance:**
<https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance>

5. Proposed Way Forward

- 5.1 Once adopted, it will be the role of the Communications Team to ensure that communications protocols get cascaded through the organisation and are adopted and adhered to by all of the Officers and Members.
- 5.2 One of the primary channels that we would be using to do this is the Communications Champions, which involves representatives

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from every area of work, who will be taking on a number of roles and responsibilities in communications.

- 5.3 These Officers will act as champions in each of their work area to ensure that these policies and protocols become the norm for how we communicate.
- 5.4 All of the Councils' communications activities will be guided by the Council's visions, themes and priorities and the terminology and language that we use must have a golden thread back to the Council's plans.
- 5.5 In order to deliver these messages and themes to all audiences in the best manner, it is essential that the business of the Council is communicated through the communications team. The Communications team can guide, advice and support the Officers and Members to ensure those priorities and themes are embedded in what and how we communicate.

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	<p>The implications of not agreeing this protocol and associated policies are that we will not be delivering the best communications service to customers and Officers and will be unable to effectively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote, managing and protecting the reputation of both councils • Publicise, the services, achievements and aspirations of the councils to residents, businesses, local communities and partners • Identify risks to our reputation and advice on actions to mitigate against any damage • Facilitate good communications practices across both councils • Create and support a Communications Champions group within the councils comprising of Officers from all areas of council work and service delivery • Monitor all media and sharing the information for a greater understating of key issues and a better understanding of public opinion, ensuring key Officers are aware of published media articles • Align all of both Councils' communications activities with the corporate purpose, themes and objectives of both councils.
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Legal/Governance		<p>All of our communication activities are governed by the Local Government Acts 1972 and 1986 as well as the updated Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity published in March 2011.</p> <p>This provides us with a framework to ensure proper use of public funds for publicity. The code sets out seven key principles and these MUST be adhered to at all times.</p> <p>A copy of the Code of Recommended Practice is available here.</p> <p>Other legislation also has a bearing on communications activities of both Councils and these include the Data Protection Act 1998 (individuals rights over personal information), the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the right to obtain information held by public authorities) and the laws of defamation – slander (the spoken word) and libel (written). Copyright Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, Equalities Act 2010.</p>
Financial		<p>The protocols and policies attached to this report are not asking for any additional funding.</p>
Risk		<p>There is a much greater risk of this protocol and policy not being adopted, than adopting it. At the moment there are no policies or protocols governing our communications activities and Officers and Members do not have a framework through which to communicate with our audiences.</p> <p>This protocol and policies provides a guide and set of principles to work by, which have been written with the aim of protecting the reputation of the Councils and providing us with the framework to deliver much improved communications to customers.</p>
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity		<p>The services we provide are for the benefit of all citizens of the United Kingdom. No user should be excluded on the basis of disability. To do so would breach the Equality Act 2010.</p>
Safeguarding		<p>All Communications activities need to be mindful of Safeguarding issues relating to vulnerable groups and young people.</p>

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		And nothing in this policy should breach or compromise the other policies of the council including safeguarding.
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder		
Health, Safety and Wellbeing		
Other implications		

Supporting Information

Appendices:

Only include appendices if the information is needed to make the decision but cannot be put within the report, such as a strategic plan or corporate policy.

Communications Protocol Document
Communications Policy
Social media Policy

Background Papers:

[under provisions of the Local Government Act 1972]

Best Practice guides:

Local Government Communications resources:
<http://www.lgcomms.org.uk/resources/resource-library>

Local government Association:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/communications-support>

Government Communication Service Guidance:

<https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance>

Recommended Code of Practice for Local Authorities

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recommended-code-of-practice-for-local-authority-publicity>

Approval and clearance of report

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Process checklist	Completed
Portfolio Holder briefed	Y
SLT Rep briefed	Y
Relevant Exec Director sign off (draft)	Y
Data protection issues considered	
If exempt information, public (part 1) report also drafted. (Committee/Scrutiny)	