

Appendix A

Luton Council Standards Committee: Communications protocols

Introduction

- 1 The council's standards committee promotes and maintains high standards of conduct by elected members of the council, advising on and monitoring the operation of the councillors' code of conduct.
- 2 The committee comprises elected members and independent people and will investigate and make a judgement on any allegations that an elected member of the council has breached the code of conduct.
- 3 These communication protocols are designed to support the work of the standards committee and ensure an equitable and consistent approach to working with the media, in line with the principles of open government and accountability.

Hearings

- 4 There is a clear public interest in promoting the integrity of public authorities and public confidence in them.
- 5 Therefore hearings should be held in public unless the standards committee decides that there are reasons for protecting the privacy of those involved in the hearing that are more important than the need for a public hearing.
- 6 The local media are sent the invites and agenda papers for Standards Committee meetings

Response to press enquiries – prior to hearing

- 7 When the Monitoring Officer gets a complaint that will progress through the formal stages, or one that is likely to generate media coverage, he/she will notify the communications team so that it can prepare for any media enquiries and advise elected members and officers on communications issues throughout the proceedings.
- 8 A holding statement will be prepared if necessary by the communications team and agreed with the chair of the standards committee and the monitoring officer.
- 9 In the event of media enquiries, only the following details can be confirmed as appropriate:
 - the name of an elected member
 - the type of person who made the allegation (a member, officer or a citizen)

- the part of the code potentially breached
 - whether the case was referred for investigation and, if not, the reason why it was not referred
 - the date of when the allegation was received and the date when a decision was made on whether or not to investigate
 - the outcome of any investigation.
- 10 It will be stressed that a complaint is just that and while an investigation is ongoing, no decision is made regarding a member's guilt or innocence.
- 11 The communications team will inform the member concerned that there has been media interest and that a response has been issued. The member concerned and members of the standards committee will be sent a copy of the response as soon as it is issued.
- 12 The committee, elected members and the council will not proactively issue press releases or statements concerning an ongoing inquiry.
- 13 Only the communications team will issue press statements in response to press enquiries and only then after they have been authorised by the chair of the standards committee and the monitoring officer

Press releases to communicate the findings of the committee

- 14 The findings of a standards committee hearings are published the council's website
- 15 Any press release should be issued as soon as possible after the conclusion of the standards committee hearing and restrict itself to a statement of the facts.
- 16 The Monitoring Officer attending the standards committee hearing will alert the communications team that a press release will be required when the hearing is concluded. Immediately after the conclusion of the hearing the chair of the standards committee will brief the communications team and a press release will be drafted for their approval.
- 17 If the standards committee determines that the elected member concerned has breached the code of conduct then a press release will always be issued. The press release will:
- identify the member concerned
 - the nature of the complaint
 - the fact that they have been found to have breached the code
 - the details of that breach
 - the reasons for the committee's findings
 - the sanction imposed or action taken and the fact that the member can apply for permission to appeal.

- 18 If the standards committee finds that an elected member did not breach the code of conduct then a press release may also be issued – unless that elected member objects.
- 19 The member concerned is entitled to a copy of any press release and members of the standards committee will be sent a copy of the press release as soon as it is issued.
- 20 Only the communications team will issue press releases and only then after they have been authorised by the chair of the standards committee and the monitoring officer.
- 21 The communications team will respond to any further press enquires as a result of the press release in consultation with the chair of the standards committee and the monitoring officer
- 22 If any members of the standards committee are approached directly by the press with enquiries relating to committee business they should refer the journalist to the council's communications team (telephone 01582 547402).

Spokesperson

- It is recommended that the chair of the standards committee (or the Vice-Chair in their absence) should be the spokesperson - to speak to the media on behalf of the committee. In the absence of the Chair or Vice-Chair, the Monitoring Officer will be contacted and a view taken.
- The communications team will filter any press enquiries, discuss and agree with the spokesperson an appropriate response as soon as possible, clear that response with the Monitoring Officer and respond to the publication making the original enquiry. deadline.
- If it is alleged that an officer has breached the protocol, the matter will be referred to the monitoring officer and may lead to disciplinary investigation.