



AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION PT4A APPENDIX F(A) - PROTOCOL ON MEDIA RELATIONS

To:

Civic Affairs Committee 02/02/2022

Report by:

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Wards affected:

All

1. Introduction / Executive Summary

This report recommends removing sections 1-3 of Pt4A Appendix F(A) of the constitution to allow the council to be more flexible, take account of changes in media practice over the last 20 years, future changes in the way the council engages with a rapidly changing media industry, and the changing nature of communications and engagement with Cambridge residents and communities more broadly.

A document explaining the way the council proposes to conduct its media relations going forward has been produced, is attached to this report as appendix B and will be maintained and updated by officers and shared with councillors or the public on request.

This report does not recommend removing or changing sections 4 and 5 of that part of the constitution, the parts that deal with party political publicity and publicity in the run-up to elections.

2. Recommendations

That Civic Affairs Committee recommends to Council that sections 1-3 of Pt4A Appendix F(A) of the constitution be deleted, as illustrated in Appendix A of this report.

3. Background

The Council interacts with the media as part of its communication and engagement activities. The purpose is to ensure residents, businesses and other stakeholders receive accurate and timely information about the work of the council, its policies and services.

This can be through pro-active publication of material as a change in service or policy arises, or re-actively in response to stories or information published about the council by others.

Councils are required to consider the national [Code of Recommended Guidance on Local Authority Publicity](#) in their communication activity.

Several years ago a protocol on media relations was incorporated into Cambridge City Council's constitution as Pt4A Appendix F(A). This stipulates the process for producing and approving council press releases, media statements and letters to media organisations. It was produced before the advent of social media and rolling news and has not been updated since.

It is unusual for councils to set out the detail of processes for media relations in their constitutions. Some councils do include sections on media relations, but few if any prescribe the process for issuing media releases, for instance, in the same level of detail as Cambridge City does.

While the process as set out is clear for straightforward media relations such as issuing press releases, it has not kept pace with changes in the media industry. At times the process defined in the protocol, and the degree of prescription has felt constraining for officers and members seeking to ensure accurate information is provided to the media in a timely way, and it has not placed professional communications advice to the fore.

Since the media protocol was incorporated into the council's constitution, the way the media works, and the way the council engages with its communities, has changed significantly. Rather than being dominated by a printed daily

newspaper, local media activity is now more focused on digital communications which don't have a set print deadline as such but operate more on a 24/7 "rolling news" basis.

Recent years have also seen the rapid increase in prominence of social media as a very dynamic platform for news and information to be disseminated. The Council is keen to modernise the way it engages with the media and its communities, and senior officers have reviewed the way the council manages its corporate communications over the past years, learning from the Local Government Association and from comparable councils.

Through this review, officers have identified a need to place communications professionals more clearly at the heart of the council's communications activity than the media protocol prescribes, in the same way that professional officers lead on other areas of council business (such as finance, HR, legal, ICT etc.).

As part of this move to modernize and professionalise the councils communications activity, the council has, through the 2021 Medium Term Financial Strategy, provided resources to recruit additional members to the corporate communications team. This will allow a greater degree of professional communications expertise to be used in developing clear communications materials and making the most of modern media tools and techniques.

These improvements do not change the member responsibility for council press relations, and it is envisaged that councillors (usually Executive councillors) will continue in the majority of instances to sign off press releases, in conjunction with senior officers, as before. (As before, there may also be occasions when a media statement needs to be issued by officers urgently when an Executive councillor is not available, or when the nature of the subject matter requires it).

Similarly, members of other groups on the council will continue to have their contact details provided on council press releases, and all councillors will continue to receive all council press releases when they are published.

Appendix B shows the process envisaged for media relations in normal circumstances. Variance from this would usually be with the approval of the Chief Executive or other appropriate senior officer. This process note will be maintained by the Corporate Communications Manager, and any significant changes to it will be communicated to councillors.

Removing sections 1-3 of that part of the constitution will allow the council to continue to adapt and change its approach in the future as the communications function learns by doing what works well; and, as the media world the council operates in continues to evolve without having to bring a report to council on changes to the constitution.

This would bring Cambridge city council into line with other councils and help the council to become the more modern, dynamic, flexible and responsive organisation we aspire to be.

4. Implications

a) Financial Implications

There are no financial implications of this change to the constitution.

b) Staffing Implications

Removing this text from the constitution will not have staff implications. The implications of adopting a more modern approach to media relations (as described in Appendix B) will be that the skills and experience of the corporate communications team are more fully utilised, and officers in other services are better supported in communicating their policies and services.

c) Equality and Poverty Implications

An Equality & Poverty Impact Assessment has not been conducted as it is the report author's view that removing this text from the constitution does not have tangible equality or poverty implications.

d) Net Zero Carbon, Climate Change and Environmental Implications

Removing this text from the constitution will not have carbon or climate change implications.

e) Procurement Implications

n/a.

f) Community Safety Implications

n/a.

5. Consultation and communication considerations

This recommendation relates to the way an internal operation of a council function is prescribed in the constitution, and therefore does not have impacts on members of the public who use the council's services that would merit consultation or communication.

The wider changes to the way the council's communication function works in the future will be communicated to staff, and to media outlets, in due course.

This report has been shared in draft form with the Leaders of the three political Groups on the Council.

6. Background papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

7. Appendices

Appendix A – Part4A Appendix F(A) of the council's constitution showing proposed amendments to the constitution

Appendix B – Chart showing updated approach to media relations

8. Inspection of papers

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact ANDREW LIMB, Head of Corporate Strategy, tel: 01223 457004, email: andrew.limb@cambridge.gov.uk.