

Brent Housing Partnership (BHP)

Media Protocol 2008-2009

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this media protocol is to outline a simple procedure for BHP staff working with the communications team in response to a media enquiry. It also sets out the standards which govern the media relations service provided by the communications office.

2.0 Role of the communications team

Tim Carruthers, the communications manager and Orla Sedze the communications officer, handle all media enquiries for BHP. It is their role to provide an accurate and timely response to media enquiries, to protect the organisation's reputation, and to promote its public profile by encouraging balanced media coverage of its work.

3.0 Legal context

Although BHP is an organisation independent of the local authority, Brent Council, it is wholly owned by the authority and it is appropriate that in the interests of best practice BHP's communications service operates within the Legal framework set out in the Local Government Act 1986 and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity which also has the full force of law. These ensure that publicity informs rather than persuades people to hold a particular viewpoint. They also stipulate that local authorities should not publish any material that appears to affect public support for a particular party.

The Code defines the main functions of local authority publicity as follows:

“To increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs; to allow local people a real and informed say about

issues that affect them; to explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities, and in general to improve local accountability.”

This definition is apt when considering publicity for BHP as it is working towards greater transparency and improved relations with residents.

4.0 Protocol for handling media enquiries

Managing homes for over 13,000 tenants and leaseholders in Brent it is inevitable that BHP will be approached regularly by the local press for background to their housing stories. A good proportion of these enquiries will be hostile and need to be handled sensitively to limit potential damage to BHP.

In order to reduce the risk of negative publicity it is essential that all officers work closely with the communications manager and communications assistant to fully research the complete history of the media enquiry in an accurate and timely manner. The way we respond to these enquiries will influence the media's perception of BHP and therefore the kind of coverage we receive.

Any officer who is contacted directly by a media organisation must, in the first instance, refer the query to the communications manager:

Tim Carruthers
Communications Manager
Brent Housing Partnership
Chancel House
Neasden Lane
London NW10 2UF
020 8937 2399
0796 801 8842 (Tim)
0795 796 6335 (Orla)

Take basic details of the enquiry including the journalists name, contact details, publication and deadline. If Tim or Orla are not available contact Linda Footer, Head of Governance, Communications & Neighbourhood Services, on 020 8937 2356 or 07940 527502.

4.1 Guide to dealing with media queries

1. Once a query is received the communications manager will take full responsibility of the media enquiry, taking details of the query including the journalists name, contact details, publication and deadline.
2. Within half an hour of the enquiry being received the communications manager will meet with the relevant head of service to devise the best possible course of action.
3. If crisis management is required the head of department will work with the communications manager and put together a brief action plan on how best to deal with the query. This will include
 - A list of officers and managers to approach for further information.
 - A time scale to be worked within.
 - And if necessary the head of department and the communications manager will visit the site of the query to gain a good understanding of the issues raised.
4. For general media enquiries the head of department will direct the communications manager to the most senior member of staff who will take responsibility for the gathering of information.
5. The officer / manager must use their initiative to access all sources of information and prepare a comprehensive response to the questions raised. This should include thorough research on relevant software such as First Housing and Domdoc and other records where information is stored. It may also be appropriate to ask colleagues if they have any background to add or suggestions of sources for further information.
6. The officer / manager will report back to the communications officer within the agreed timescale with all the details requested.

7. The communications manager will draft a statement in consultation with the officer / manager and the head of department. Officers should check for accuracy and be one hundred per cent confident that this response is fair and accurate.
8. Once all parties are in agreement the statement will be sent to the relevant department director for signing off before mailing to the media group.

4.2 Interviews and use of spokespeople when responding to media enquiries

The communications manager can be quoted as a “Brent Housing Partnership spokesperson / spokesman”. BHP’s Executive Directors and Senior Officers are responsible for making press releases in relation to the day-to-day business of the Organisation. Board Members will not normally be involved in making press releases. A press release may be made by Board Members only where twelve Board Members have agreed the contents of it. The twelve must comprise: four Council Members, four Tenant Members and four Independent Members and notice must be given to the Chair of the Organisation before the release is made. Notice of the intended press release should also be given to the Managing Director as a matter of courtesy.

In the interests of accountability or to protect the organisation’s reputation, if an enquiry warrants a response from the managing director or chair of the board they will be contacted for a comment.

When speaking to the media on behalf of the organisation all board members and management officers should ensure compliance with section 40 of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity which states that, publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political.

If a response is emailed or faxed to the media, the communications manager or officer will telephone the media organisation to make sure that they have received it.

No member of the management group other than the managing director and no board member, other than the designated speakers should speak to the media on behalf of BHP. Board members are required to adhere to their code of conduct and act in a manner which puts the interests of the organisation first.

If the managing director or any board member does speak to the media on behalf of BHP without the prior knowledge of the communications team they should notify the communications manager as soon as possible. This is to protect both the organisation and the person who may not be aware of extenuating circumstances.

In the case of the media requesting a political comment, the enquiry will be referred to Brent Council.

4.3 News statements

News statements are written responses to requests for statements from BHP rather than responses from a BHP spokesperson, officer or board member and are usually issued during crisis management situations only. See appendix 1 – Crisis Management.

News statements should be written and issued on the agreement of the Managing Director or in her absence one of the other Directors together with the communications manager. They will be printed on news release paper, clearly marked “statement” and issued only to journalists who request them.

Where the issue may also concern a partner such as the council or a contractor then the communications team will inform the partner organisation’s communications officer. The BHP communications manager

will devise a response and send to the officer for comment. If the enquiry is first and foremost a BHP matter it will be sent to the media organisation by BHP.

5.0 Proactive contact with the media

5.1 Placing stories

Where it is warranted the communications manager will contact key media to place news stories or features. In such cases it may not be necessary to issue a news release.

5.2 Media briefings or lunches

Where it is warranted the communications manager may arrange for briefings or lunches for the managing director, or appropriate senior member of the management group or board members to meet journalists to brief them on a particularly complex issue or to build good working relations over a period of time.

5.3 Issuing news releases

BHP news releases should only be issued by the communications manager with approval from the Managing Director or in her absence any one of the other Directors.

All news releases will include a quote from a member of the management group with responsibility for the area concerned. Releases may also include a quote from a partner organisation, board member or resident where appropriate.

In all cases the contact details for the communications manager will be included on the release for further information and, if appropriate, details for the relevant departmental contact.

All quotes will be cleared with the named person before use. If a senior officer cannot be contacted to clear his or her quote then the managing director or other relevant director will be asked to clear it on his or her behalf. All news releases will be formatted to house style and sent out by email. If the news release is about a particularly important aspect of the organisation's business or has been requested by the managing director, a member of the board or a member of the senior management group, the communications manager will telephone the appropriate news desk to ask them whether they have received it.

All news releases must be approved by the Managing Director or in her absence any other BHP Director prior to being sent out.

All members/senior management officers named in news releases will be sent a copy by fax/email prior to it being sent to the media. In order to meet deadlines it may be necessary for the managing director or any other BHP Director to clear releases before they have been seen by the named person/people.

All news releases will be posted on the internet after they have been sent out.

5.4 Joint news releases with partners

If a project being publicised is a joint initiative with another organisation BHP will ensure that:

- BHPs role or contribution is identified appropriately and the relevant quotes from named board members/senior management included

- BHPs logo is included alongside the logos of other organisations involved on the news release
- the draft text of the news release is approved by the communications officer prior to being issued
- the method, manner and timing of distribution are agreed in advance with the relevant contacts from each of the partner organisations.

If BHP is writing the joint press release it will ensure that the release is cleared with the relevant communications person in the partner organisation.

6.0 Using photographs and arranging photo opportunities

6.1 Using Photographs

All photographs must be accompanied by a model release form a copy of which must be kept by the communications team. This is to ensure the organisation is authorised to use the photograph in its publications or on website

6.2 Arranging photo opportunities

All photographers should be issued with the photo release forms which need to be completed and handed in with the photographs. If an event involves a school or club the organiser needs to contact the organisation in advance with the appropriate child photo permission form which should be passed onto parents/guardians.

Photographers should be fully briefed on the event and given an indication of what type of picture is required and where it will be used.

7.0 Press and publicity during pre-election

The Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity lays down particular rules on publicity in the period between an election being called and taking place. This period varies in length from one election to another.

The code is relevant to BHP because several of its board members are councillors.

The Code states that,

“The period between the notice of election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.”

It also says that councils should not incur any expenses relating to the promotion of a candidate, including producing publicity material such as circulars, publications or advertisements, presenting the candidate or their views, or disparaging another candidate.

BHP will be particularly careful in the run up to all elections including local, general and by-elections, European parliament, London Assembly and the London Mayoral elections.

All publicity referring to individual councillors, political parties or anyone standing for election who is part of the board of BHP will be suspended between the publication of a notice of election and polling day. This includes press releases, publications, documents on the internet and intranet, public events and meetings, photo opportunities and press conferences.

During this period the communications office will not deal with controversial issues, or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual members or groups of members.

The only exception to this rule is when an emergency occurs. If there is an emergency and the managing director considers that there is a clearly demonstrable case that the organisation's interests would be ill-served by

holding an event at another or time or there is a genuine need for a board member level response, he or she may permit them to act as a spokesperson.

During the pre-election period the communications team will ensure that as far as possible responses only contain factual information and do not mention individual candidates or councillors.

Where political comments are sought, media representatives will be directed to deal with the board member directly on a personal basis.

8.0 Evaluation and reporting

The following evaluation and reporting of the work of the communications team will take place:

- A summary of all media reports about BHP will be made available to the managing director and head of governance and communications each month.
- A six monthly report will be compiled for the managing director and head of governance and communications including:
 - a list of positive coverage in national, regional and specialist media
 - the total number of news releases issued
 - the total number of media enquiries received
 - whether news coverage was positive or negative, and whether it included comments from the council.
 - how many of the media releases issues resulted in news stories.