

## **APPENDIX 3**

# **Brent Housing Partnership**

## **Media Protocol**

### **1.0 Introduction**

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

### **2.0 Role of the communications officer**

The Communications Officer handles 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. Some 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 Officer 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 Officer:

Nadia Khan  
Brent Housing Partnership  
Chancel House  
Neasden Lane  
London NW10 2UF  
020 8937 2363

Take basic details of the enquiry including the journalists name, contact details, publication and deadline. If Nadia is not available contact Linda Footer, Head of Corporate Services, on 020 8937 2356 or 07940 527502.

#### **4.1 Guide to dealing with media queries**

1. Once a query is received the communications officer 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 officer 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 officer 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 officer 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 officer 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 officer 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 officer can be quoted as a “Brent Housing Partnership spokesperson / spokeswoman”. 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 BHP before the release is made. Notice of the intended press release should also be given to the Chief Executive 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 Chief Executive 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 BHP 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 officer will telephone the media organisation to make sure that they have received it.

No member of the management group other than the Chief Executive 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 Chief Executive or any board member does speak to the media on behalf of BHP without the prior knowledge of the communications officer they should notify the communications officer 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 Chief Executive or in his absence the Director of Finance. 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 officer will inform the partner organisation’s communications officer. The BHP communications officer 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 officer 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 officer may arrange for briefings or lunches for the Chief Executive, 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 press releases**

BHP press releases should only be issued by the communications officer with approval from the Chief Executive or in his absence the Director of Finance.

All press 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 officer 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 Chief Executive or Director of Finance will be asked to clear it on his behalf. All press releases will be formatted to house style and sent out by email. If the press release is about a particularly important aspect of the organisation's business or has been requested by the Chief Executive, a member of the board or a member

of the senior management group, the communications officer will telephone the appropriate news desk to ask them whether they have received it.

All press releases must be approved by the Chief Executive or in his absence the Director of Finance.

All members/senior management officers named in press 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 Chief Executive or Director of Finance to clear releases before they have been seen by the named person/ people.

All press 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 officer. 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 four 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 is 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 officer 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 Chief Executive 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 officer 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 officer will take place:

- A summary of all media reports about BHP will be made available to the Chief Executive and head of governance and communications each month.
- A six monthly report will be compiled for the chief executive 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.