

Council 19 July 2007 – agenda item 5b, Minute 25b

Question from Cllr A Riley to the Leader of the Council and response by Councillor RMA Manning:

On 1 June an email titled “Inspire Media Protocol” was sent to all members. This email and its attachment require clarification. I replied on 4 June asking a number of questions. A senior officer sent me two brief replies, one saying I would get a response shortly, the second saying that the matter had been handed to the Leader. On 8 June Cllr Manning made it clear in a reply to Cllr Roberts that he had no intention of answering any questions on this matter. I wish to request that the following questions are now answered properly:

a) Why was it felt necessary to invent a name to describe the Council’s Improvement Plan?

It was felt that a name for all work under the [Improvement Plan](#) would help to bring together the different workstreams underneath a recognisable banner. It was also felt that we needed a positive, motivating description of the Improvement Plan’s work, especially to differentiate it from other generic departmental improvement plans. The name was informed by staff suggestions.

b) The document begins: “This protocol proposes that:”. So what precisely is its status?

The Inspire media protocol has been agreed and stands as an appendix to the [council’s publicity protocol and guidelines](#)

c) Why was this announcement made just eight days after our bimonthly Full Council meeting? Had it been on that agenda, these issues could have been properly debated and agreed.

The Inspire media protocol was agreed with the leader, communications portfolio holder (at the time Cllr Simon Edwards) and Senior Management Team. As it simply clarifies standard practice it was not considered to be necessary for the protocol to be debated and agreed at full Council.

d) At the end of the attachment it says that this protocol; “Sits alongside the overarching SCDC media protocol”. What exactly does that mean? Where is this media protocol defined?

The council’s [publicity protocol and guidelines](#) were published in 2004 and cover a range of publicity and media advice and guidelines for Members and officers. It is available on the intranet and via the communications team. The council’s media guidelines and plan are due to be revisited as part of the [council’s new Communications Strategy](#); Members will be one of the key stakeholder groups consulted. It is suggested that the new guidelines and plans be included in future editions of the Member Toolkit.

e) Is it the intention that any member who has signed up to the “Member Toolkit” is now deemed to have signed up to the Inspire Protocol?

No. The protocol is for information and simply outlines who the council’s official spokespeople on certain issues are.

f) What sanction awaits any who breach the “Inspire” protocol?

There are no sanctions. The Inspire media protocol simply outlines who the council's official spokespeople on certain issues are. Only these spokespeople will be put forward by the communications team for proactive and reactive media work.

g) The “Inspire” protocol is described as similar to the Traveller issues protocol. The Traveller issues protocol was issued when Traveller matters were generating major court hearings and it was seen by all councillors that any public utterances had to be very carefully vetted. Why is it considered that that should apply to our Improvement Plan?

As the Improvement Plan is the council's way forward for the next 18-24 months, it was felt that a media protocol was needed to outline which members and officers would be the council's official spokespeople when undertaking any proactive or reactive media work related to Inspire.

By identifying official spokespeople for Inspire, the communications team is following a tried and tested method of putting forward official spokespeople on behalf of the council. For the majority of issues these have - and will continue to be - portfolio holders. Under the new Cabinet structure consideration is also given to lead members for crosscutting themes and/or corporate priorities. The Inspire media protocol simply clarifies who will be put forward as Inspire spokespeople.

h) Since the Improvement Plan appears to encompass every aspect of council policy, is this not an attempt to stifle any comment by any member on any aspect of the council's work?

No. As stated in the council's [current publicity protocol and guidelines](#) “Members are naturally free to speak to the media and discuss issues.” The Inspire media protocol is not intended to stop elected Members from commenting, it is simply stating who the council's official spokespeople will be for both proactive and reactive media work related to Inspire.

Whilst political groups and/or individual Members may make their own political statements to the media, it is not appropriate for the council's communications team to be involved in that process.

i) Housing Stock Options are included within the remit of “Inspire”. The Leader has always made it clear that he could only proceed with his objective of selling off our housing stock a) if that policy gained a two-thirds majority within the council and b) if the tenants also vote in favour. Please could he (or the Deputy Leader) now confirm that both these conditions still apply.

The Leader has not made any statement to Council that there will be a requirement that housing stock transfer be approved by two-thirds of Members. It is the tenants' vote that will actually determine whether it happens and that will be by a simple majority of those voting.

j) The third bullet point states that opposition groups may identify an official Inspire spokesperson. Does this mean that both opposition groups are each entitled to do this, or that they have to agree one between them?

There is only one Leader of the Opposition and as such part of the Inspire Team. The Protocol does not seek to prevent the Convenor of the Independents from commenting for them.

- k) What is the purpose of opposition groups having spokespersons if they are in any event prevented from making any public comment on any matter?**

As stated previously, elected Members and political groups may make their own statements to the media, but it is not appropriate for the council's communications team to be involved in that process.

Opposition spokespeople are copied into relevant news releases and responses to media enquiries as a matter of course. If they choose to make their own statements in response, they are asked to make it clear in which capacity they are making the comment.

- l) The penultimate bullet point appears to permit ordinary members to comment to the press on any aspect of council policy which affects the residents of their own ward. Please could you confirm that this is indeed the case and that it applies to all aspects of Council policy.**

As already stated, Members are free to speak to the media and discuss issues. However, all Members should be mindful of the need to protect and build the reputation of the council at all times.

- m) In the reply the Leader sent Cllr Roberts on 8 June he stated that any decisions reached by the Conservative Group are the policy of Council. Does he intend to amend the Constitution to implement this far-reaching change? Please could full minutes of Conservative Group meetings be issued in future to all members so that we can become aware of such constitutional changes as they take place.**

It was not intended that there will be any change to the Constitution and it will continue to be for Members of this Council to decide whether or not to agree to and implement the policies of the Conservative Group.