

Media Relations Policy

Policy – CP049

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1. The purpose of this policy is

To guide Council's media liaison activities and specify procedures and protocols for dealing with media requests with the intention of informing our stakeholders.

2. Policy Statement

This policy ensures that:

- Accurate, timely and consistent information is provided to the media;
- The most qualified and appropriate spokespeople and/or sources of information at Council are identified;
- Council's integrity and professional image is preserved; and
- Issues are monitored and handled in an appropriate manner.

3. Guiding Principles

3.1 Dealing with media enquiries

The Public Relations Officer will coordinate and deal with all media enquiries. When appropriate and required the Communications Officer will provide support.

All queries to staff from the media are to be referred immediately to Council's Public Relations Officer so that they can be logged and responded to in the most efficient, appropriate and accurate manner. Queries to Councillors may also be referred to the Public Relations Officer.

The Public Relations Officer will ascertain the nature of the query and organise the most appropriate response to the request for comment or information in liaison with the Mayor, Councillors, Chief Executive Officer, General Managers or Managers. This may include an interview or photo opportunity.

Where a media agency requests information on a specific topic, the response will be provided to them exclusively.

3.2 Authorised Spokespeople

To ensure clarity in Council's messages and the most appropriate responses to issues, the following guidelines are provided in selecting spokespeople for particular issues:

Type of issue	Definition	Authorised spokespeople
Political issues	Involve matters of policy, Council position, external liaison or dealings with government bodies or municipal advocacy on behalf of the region.	Mayor, Portfolio Councillor or the Chief Executive Officer
Policy and strategic issues	Issues involving Council's dealings with external parties and Council's long term vision for the community.	Mayor, Portfolio Councillor or the Chief Executive Officer
Operational issues	Issues relating to the day-to-day operation of Council that do not involve Council policy. This includes Council's normal programs and services.	Chief Executive Officer, relevant General Manager or Manager, Public Relations Officer, Communications Officer
Technical or expert issues	Issues requiring very specific, technical or detailed information to provide understanding on a complex topic.	A nominated staff member who has the knowledge and media training.
Special interest issues	Stories that typically focus on human interest matters, analysis or background that lend a human face to a story. These do not usually delve into operational issues or matters of Council policy.	Relevant Councillor or staff member as determined in consultation with the Public Relations Officer and relevant Manager (if applicable).

All authorised spokespeople must have completed an approved media training program. Exceptions will only be allowed with approval from the Manager Corporate Administration in consultation with relevant Manager.

Council media resources and support will only be provided to an authorised Council spokesperson.

Where there is a dispute as to the appropriate spokesperson, the matter shall be referred to the Mayor or Chief Executive Officer for a decision.

Spokespersons have the opportunity to be briefed or have research conducted by the Public Relations or Communications Officer before being interviewed. It is recognised that in some instances, ie a weekly radio interview, civic function etc, that staff may be questioned outside expected parameters.

Designated spokespersons will work with the Marketing and Communications Unit to determine key messages and ensure any timelines or deadlines to meet media requests are delivered upon.

It should be noted the Public Relations or Communications Officer may be an appropriate spokesperson.

3.3 Councillors and the media

- Councillors have been elected to represent our community and are free to speak to the media on any subject;
- Councillors have the right to express personal opinions on any issue, but must make it clear that they are speaking for themselves and not on behalf of Council, unless they are supporting a Council position;
- Councillors may issue media releases under their own name, however any announcements, launches or timelines for Council projects are to be made in an official Council media release. Councillors issuing their own releases should also send a copy to the Marketing and Communications Unit.
- Councillors have the right to be briefed by the Public Relations or Communications Officer or relevant manager on topics for which they are the authorised spokesperson;
- Councillors will be quoted in media releases related to their portfolio. Where there is more than one Councillor representing a portfolio, the spokesperson responsibilities will be shared as agreed by all Councillors in the portfolio. This approach will then be implemented by the Public Relations Officer in a consistent fashion; and
- If a Councillor has taken a lead role in a specific project or initiative, they will assume spokesperson responsibilities.

3.4 Staff and the media

- Staff are encouraged to cooperate with the media, subject to the guidelines in this policy;
- All media enquiries must be referred to the Public Relations or Communications Officer;
- Council employees may speak to the media or write letters to the editor as private individuals with the following restrictions:
 - they do not identify themselves as employees of Council.
 - their comments are not seen to represent Council's position or policy.
- Council employees are encouraged to refrain from commenting on Council business, policy, activities or Councillors in the media;
- Council staff should not respond to public criticism of Council, Council staff, policy or activities via letters or text messages to media agencies unless approval has been given by the Chief Executive Officer;
- In the event of an industrial dispute (or incident likely to lead to an industrial dispute) statements on behalf of Council employees should be issued via the relevant union; and
- Contractors, service providers or suppliers engaged by Council must refer all media enquiries relating to Council to the Public Relations or Communications Officer.

3.5 Speaking Off the Record

Staff and Councillors should be aware that all conversations with a member of the media, whether an interview is agreed upon or not, are treated as on the record, and can be attributed to them.

Speaking off the record can be useful to provide information for the purposes of briefing on an issue in which Council is not involved. This must be agreed to by the staff member and journalist prior to the discussion.

3.6 Approaching the media

The Public Relations Officer is responsible for issuing Council's media releases and contacting journalists about potential stories.

Staff members must refrain from approaching the media directly. They must provide the Public Relations Officer with the information or opportunity for the media instead.

If a Councillor or officer becomes aware of a potential media opportunity or issue they should contact and brief the Public Relations Officer. The Public Relations Officer will work with relevant staff and Councillors to prepare any necessary information (such as media releases, background papers and kits) for approval before they are distributed.

Staff and Councillors should be aware of requirements surrounding the Local Government Act and in particular Conflict of Interest provisions.

3.7 Issue and crisis management

The Public Relations Officer monitors media and social media activity and identifies potential issues. If a Councillor or staff member becomes aware of an issue that has the potential to develop further, this should be brought to the attention of the Public Relations Officer or Customer Relations Coordinator as soon as possible.

In the event of a crisis or unexpected issue, the Public Relations Officer will put into place appropriate crisis management procedures to ensure Council's communication with the media is appropriately managed. These procedures include:

- Identifying and briefing the most appropriate designated Council spokesperson (generally the Mayor or Chief Executive Officer);
- Convening discussions of all communications with relevant staff/Councillors;
- Ensuring only designated spokespeople make comment during a crisis situation; and
- Developing consistent key messages.

Statements made during a crisis situation may have far-reaching effects, including potential use in legal proceedings against the Council. It should, therefore, be noted that comment contrary to the provisions of this policy could prejudice Council's ability to communicate in the most appropriate way and compromise the professionalism of Council's image.

3.8 Media Releases

The media is an important customer of the Marketing and Communications Unit. The Public Relations Officer is responsible for the ongoing management and implementation of a proactive program to keep the local media informed of Council decisions and activities. The program includes daily contact with media, proactive story placements, media briefings after Council meetings and distribution of media releases.

Only Councillors, Chief Executive Officer or General Managers will be quoted in media releases. Where Council is a partner in a joint release, an appropriate external person may be quoted alongside the authorised Council spokesperson.

To ensure total media coverage, media conferences, ceremonies or events of any sort should be scheduled for the morning or early afternoon between Mondays and Thursdays.

At times it will be necessary for a large amount of information prepared by various departments to be released on the same day. The Public Relations and/or Communications Officer will discuss the immediacy of the information with the relevant staff or Councillors and will determine the most appropriate date of release. If necessary, the timing of the releases will be referred to the Manager Corporate Administration or the Chief Executive Officer.

Councillors and staff should treat all media agencies equally and avoid preferential treatment. Media releases will be distributed to all agencies at the same time.

3.9 Media Conferences

A media conference can be useful to stimulate interest and create awareness of a particular cause or to make an important announcement.

Media conferences will be organised by the Public Relations or Communications Officer and approved by the Mayor or Chief Executive Officer. Spokespersons must be approved by the Mayor or Chief Executive Officer and should be well briefed on all aspects of the topic and possible questions the media may ask.

A media release will be prepared announcing the media conference, the subject of the conference, brief background details, who will be speaking, time, date and location.

If required, a media kit will be prepared by the Public Relations or Communications Officer for release at the commencement of the media conference.

All media events/conferences need at least four working days' notice for the organisation and preparation to be completed.

3.10 Provision of editorial content

- Council will often provide editorial content for promotional purposes via an agreed relationship with a media agency and can be in the following forms:
 - Regular radio spots (Authorised spokesperson guidelines apply);
 - Written special interest columns;
 - Articles for magazines, journals or online news services; and
 - Other formats as agreed to by the Manager Corporate Administration
- Editorial content relationships with media agencies must be organised and approved by the Marketing and Communications unit;
- Editorial content opportunities must be identified and included in branch marketing plans; and
- A plan for topics or content must be developed and provided to the Public Relations and/or Communications Officer. Any exceptions must be approved by the Manager Corporate Administration.

3.11 Caretaker Mode

Whilst Council is in Caretaker Mode due to pending elections, provisions will be made to Council's Media Relations Policy. During Caretaker Mode, the following principles will be implemented.

- Councillors will not be quoted in any issued media release;
- Councillors requesting any media releases to be written or released on their behalf will be refused under the Act;
- Appropriate spokespeople for quoting in media releases will be the CEO and General Managers, or staff member as determined in consultation with the Public Relations Officer and relevant Manager (if applicable) and the approval process still stands; and
- Media releases will be kept to an absolute minimum during this period and will be scrutinised to ensure they do not contravene the Local Government Act.

4. Who is responsible for implementing this policy?

Manager Corporate Administration and Customer Relations Officer.

5. Definitions

Portfolio Councillor	As determined by CP028 Councillors Portfolio Policy.
Off the record	Information given during an interview under the undertaking that it is not for attribution but can be published. Please note that all discussions with a member of the media are on the record unless an agreement is made to go off the record. Speaking off the record must be agreed to by the staff member and journalist prior to the discussion.
Caretaker mode	As defined in Section 93A of the Local Government Act (1989), Council enters caretaker mode during election period, beginning on the entitlement date of

a Council election and ending on 6pm of the election day.

6. Legislation and other references

6.1 Legislation

For further information related to this policy see:

- Local Government Act (1989); and
- Section 55D of the Local Government Act (1989) relating to caretaker provisions for media and communications.

6.2 Documents

This Policy is implemented in conjunction with the following documents:

- Responding to media queries deployment flowchart;
- Media release development and deployment flowchart;
- Mildura Rural City Council Media Release Request Form;
- CP 028 Councillors Portfolio Policy;
- CP 039 Mildura Rural City Council's Commitment To Good Governance;
- CP 030 Release of Confidential Information Policy; and
- Appointment of Delegates and Representatives report to Statutory Council Meeting.

6.3 Risk Assessment Reference

<p>Risk Category</p> <p>Asset Management Committees Compliance – Legal & Regulatory Contract Management Contract Tendering & Procurement Corporate Governance Environmental Sustainability</p>	✓	<p>Risk Category</p> <p>Financial Sustainability Human Resource Management Leadership & Organisational Culture Occupational Health & Safety Organisational Risk Management Project Management Public Image and Reputation</p>	✓
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