

ADOPTED BY COUNCIL: 29 JULY 2024

PURPOSE

This Policy provides a framework for Wollongong City Council's engagement with all media organisations, including print, radio, television and digital media. It confirms our ongoing commitment to provide timely and accurate information to the community through positive working relationships with media organisations.

A constructive relationship with media is a significant part of Council's role as a community leader and advocate within the region and aligns with the goal of fostering a connected and engaged community.

This Policy applies to all Council officers, Council committee members and elected officials. Its purpose is to provide clear direction on Councillor and staff roles and responsibilities in relation to media engagement.

POLICY INTENT

The main objectives of this policy are to:

1. Contribute to a cohesive, consistent and proactive media relations program and ensure public comment to the media is accurate, timely and appropriate
2. Assist in adding reputational value to Council
3. Set clear stakeholder roles and responsibilities
4. Mitigate risk and reduce the opportunity for miscommunication and distribution of inaccurate information
5. Identify Council's authorised spokespersons
6. Provide a coordinated, consistent and professional approach to media engagement.

WOLLONGONG 2032 OBJECTIVES

This Policy contributes to the delivery of Our Wollongong 2032 Goal 4, 'We are a connected and engaged community'. It specifically delivers on Objective 4.1 'Provide our community with equitable access to information and opportunities to inform decision-making'.

POLICY

The Policy sets out a framework to ensure all official communication via media engagement is communicated in a timely, accessible, accurate manner that is consistent with Council decisions and policies.

Open, transparent and timely engagement with media organisations assists Council to maximise and facilitate the effective dissemination of relevant, accurate and timely information. Council values the important role our region's media organisations play in sharing news of Council programs, events and initiatives. In addition, media engagement is invaluable in times of crisis or emergency when information needs to be communicated to the public.

This Policy will be used to assist Council officers and media organisations in understanding Council's policy and processes related to media engagement including handling media enquiries, interviews, opportunities and providing statements, releases and comments to media.

This Policy relates to all verbal, printed, electronic and online communications and engagement with media. This includes elected representatives (Councillors), the General Manager, Executive and appropriate staff including fulltime, part-time, contract, casual, work experience, cadets and trainees, contractors, volunteers and delegates of Council such as Council committee members.

Council's Communication and Marketing team will share Council news and information to the media using a combination of media releases, website, statements and official social media platforms.

This Policy does not limit or attempt to restrict relationships between Councillors and the media. Individual Councillors are free to express their own views to the media at any time.

PRINCIPLES

1. Council is committed to the guiding principles of openness, transparency, timeliness and accuracy for media engagement.
2. Council aims to regularly promote and inform media stakeholders on activities, decisions, events and achievements relevant to the community.
3. A proactive approach to the release of information is maintained unless there is an overriding public interest against disclosure.
4. Only persons holding the roles designated in this Policy are authorised to communicate with the media on behalf of Council.
5. The Lord Mayor and the General Manager are the official spokespersons on Council business.
6. The Lord Mayor may delegate to Councillors to act as spokespersons on Council business.
7. Councillors can provide comment to the media at any time. These statements should be identified as Councillor opinion and not the position of Council.
8. The General Manager or Director may nominate Council Officers to act as spokespersons where appropriate.
9. Any Council Officer contacted by the media must not provide any comment and refer the enquiry to the Communications and Marketing team.
10. Council staff and Councillors must not discuss staff, confidential legal advice or matters of commercial in-confidence with the media.
11. Media releases and statements that quote the Lord Mayor or which relate to a decision of Council are to be approved by the Office of the Lord Mayor and/or the General Manager or their delegate before release.
12. Training: Council will provide training to Council officers who engage or are authorised to engage with the media where necessary or appropriate.
13. Tone: All media engagement by Council officers must be conducted in a professional, timely and respectful manner.
14. Any communication with media organisations should reinforce the reputation and values of Council and be accurate, timely, impartial and consistent with legislation and other Council policies.
15. Records Management: Media content created and received by Council officers (including Councillors) acting in their official capacity, is a Council record and may be subject to information access applications made under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*. These records must also be managed in accordance with the requirements of the *State Records Act 1998* and Council's approved records management policies and practices.
16. Conduct: Council officers must comply with Council's Code of Conduct when engaging with the media in an official capacity or in connection with their role as a Council officer.

Council officers must not share information or make comments to the media through either direct or indirect mechanisms that:

- are defamatory, offensive, humiliating, threatening, or intimidating to other Council officers or members of the public

- contains profane language or is sexual in nature
- constitutes harassment, bullying or sexual harassment within the meaning of Council's Code of Conduct, or is unlawfully discriminatory
- is contrary to their duties under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* and their responsibilities under any policies or procedures adopted by the Council to ensure workplace health and safety
- contains content about the Council, Council officers or members of the public that is misleading or deceptive
- divulges confidential Council information
- breaches the privacy of other Council officers or members of the public
- contains allegations of suspected breaches of Council's Code of Conduct or information about the consideration of a matter under the Procedures for the Administration of the Codes of Conduct
- could be perceived to be an official comment on behalf of Council where the officer or councillor has not been authorised to make such comment
- commits Council to any action
- violates an order made by a court
- breaches copyright
- advertises, endorses, or solicits commercial products or business.

17. Breaches of this Policy will be dealt with in accordance with Wollongong City Council's Code of Conduct.

MEDIA RELATIONS DURING EMERGENCIES

1. During emergencies, such as natural disasters or public health incidents, the Communications and Marketing team will be responsible for coordinating media releases and statements on behalf of Council.
2. Council officers, including Councillors, must not provide comment or information to the media that is inconsistent with official advice issued by the Council and any other agency coordinating the emergency response.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN THE LEAD UP TO ELECTIONS

This policy does not prevent the Lord Mayor or Councillors, who are candidates at a Council or any other election, from providing comment to the media in their capacity as candidates at an election.

During designated caretaker periods prior to local government elections, the General Manager shall be the Council spokesperson.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

All Council officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council officers includes Councillors, members of staff and delegates of the Council (including members of Council committees that are delegates of Council.) • All media engagement by Council officers must be conducted in a professional, timely and respectful manner.
Lord Mayor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Lord Mayor is the spokesperson of the governing body of Council, including representing the views of the Council.

Deputy Lord Mayor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the Lord Mayor is unavailable, the Deputy Lord Mayor may act as Council's Spokesperson, as delegated by the Lord Mayor. • In circumstances where the Lord Mayor is incapacitated or otherwise unable to delegate functions under this policy, the General Manager may authorise the Deputy Mayor to act as Council's Spokesperson
Councillors	<p>As a member of the elected body and as representatives of the community, Councillors are free to express their personal views to the media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors must clarify when speaking to the media that they are expressing their personal views as an individual Councillor and that they are not speaking for the Council (unless authorised to do so). • Councillors must uphold and accurately represent the policies and decisions of Council. • Councillors must not disclose Council information unless authorised to do so. • Councillors must seek information and guidance from the General Manager/Communications and Marketing Manager where appropriate before providing comment to the media to ensure they have the most up to date and relevant information and have considered reputational or other risks. • Where Councillors become aware of potential issues that could result in media interest, they should provide this information to the General Manager/Communications and Marketing Manager.
General Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The General Manager is Council's official spokesperson on all operational and administrative matters. • The General Manager may delegate to other Council staff to speak on their behalf where appropriate (e.g., where the delegated staff member has professional expertise regarding the subject matter, or the General Manager is unavailable). • During caretaker periods prior to local government elections, the General Manager has delegation to act as Council's spokesperson.
Communications and Marketing Manager/ Communications and Marketing Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead point of contact for all media enquiries, requests for interviews, requests to film or photograph Council staff, facilities or events for news and current affairs purposes. • Responsible for preparing all media statements prior to their release. • Ensure all media statements are approved by the Lord Mayor and/or General Manager prior to their release. • Develop and/or approve media training and/or induction to be provided to relevant staff and/or Councillors. • Maintain a record of all media enquiries and responses. • Ensure media organisations and their representatives are treated professionally, equally and without bias. • Ensure media enquiries are dealt with promptly. • Provide guidance to Councillors approached by the media for comment to avoid communication of misinformation. • Manage joint media opportunities and releases with funding bodies such as State and Federal Government Departments, adhering to all Departmental Protocols.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage joint media opportunities, releases and statements with Council partners, sponsors and affiliates. • Ensure that all media releases are published on Council's website. • Notify the Office of the Lord Mayor of all media opportunities and add the media opportunity into Council's Corporate Calendar.
Council staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council staff must not speak to the media about matters relating to Council unless authorised by the General Manager or Director to do so. • If Council staff receive a media enquiry or they are invited to comment to the media on a matter relating to Council, they must refer the enquiry to the Communications and Marketing team. • If authorised to speak to the media, Council staff must: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – uphold and accurately represent the policies and decisions of the Council – must not disclose Council information unless authorised to do so by the General Manager/Communications and Marketing Manager – must seek information and guidance from the Communications and Marketing Manager/Team where appropriate before providing comment to the media to ensure they have the most up to date and relevant information and have considered reputational or other risks. • Where Council staff become aware of potential issues that could result in media interest, they should provide this information to the Communications and Marketing Manager/Team. • Directors or Senior Managers are to advise Councillors of responses to media enquiries that may relate to controversial or sensitive matters.

RESPONSE TIMES

Council's commitment is to provide timely and accurate information about Council activities and projects to the Wollongong community, the public and media organisations.

Council will work to respond to media enquiries as quickly as possible and will aim to reply to enquiries within a 48 hour period of being received, during regular office hours. Emergency or critical incident after-hours enquiries will be responded to as soon as possible, while non-urgent after-hours enquiries will be responded to within office hours. All enquiries will be acknowledged by the Communications and Marketing Team when received. In the event that the response time cannot be met due to the complexity of the request or other unforeseen circumstances, the journalist will be contacted and advised of an alternative timeframe. To facilitate prompt responses, media organisations and journalists are advised to contact the Communications and Marketing team directly via mediaoffice@wollongong.nsw.gov.au.

Student journalists - From time to time Council's Communication and Marketing Team will be contacted by student journalists seeking interviews and support for the practical application of their media studies. Council recognises the importance of supporting the next generation of media professions and will, where possible, facilitate their enquiries. On occasions where this will not be possible, this will be communicated as soon as possible to the student.

DEFINITIONS

Media: Print, digital or broadcast media used for communicating information to the public, including but not limited to, newspapers, magazines, internet publishers, journals, radio, podcasts, television, journalists, media students, digital media not social media. (Social media is covered by the Internet Communications and Private use of Social Media policies).

Media comment: Verbal or written statement issued by Council formal channels that states its position on a matter of formal business or Council policy of public interest.

Media statement: Written statement issued by Council formal channels that states its position on a matter of formal business or Council policy of public interest.

Media release: A written, pre-approved news statement/story, issued by Council to the media and the public via Council's website, used to communicate with the community to inform on current or future Council services, activities, projects or initiatives or respond to a topical or relevant issue.

Council officers: All Councillors and members of Council staff including temporary and casual employees, volunteers, service providers and contractors employed by Council, Council committee members, conduct reviewers and delegates of Council.

LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS

The Policy acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of Councillors as elected representatives as outlined in the *Local Government Act 1993*.

REVIEW

This Policy will be reviewed a minimum of once every term of Council, or more frequently as required.

RELATED STRATEGIES, POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Private Use of Social Media Policy

Internet Communication Policy

Council Codes of Conduct

APPROVAL AND REVIEW	
Responsible Division	Community, Culture and Engagement
Date adopted by Council	29 July 2024
Date/s of previous adoptions	24 August 2015, 18 February 2019
Date of next review	29 July 2027