

Council Policy – Communications and Media

Responsible Directorate	Office of the Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Responsible Business Unit/s	Media and Communications
Responsible Officer	Manager Media and Communications
Affected Business Unit/s	All

Objective

To provide a professional, consistent, and cohesive approach to addressing media related issues within the Shire of Ashburton (the Shire).

This policy provides detail on obligations and protocols for responsible engagement with the community through traditional and digital communication platforms. This includes but is not limited to advertisements, media releases and public statements, media interactions, written publications, website, social media, online and web-based forums, blogs, and online surveys/polls.

Scope

This policy is applicable to all elected members, employees, consultants, volunteers contractors, and outsourced service providers of Shire.

Policy Statement

The Shire aims to provide consistent information to the community, in a timely manner using various modes of media.

The purpose of this policy is to:

- outline the standards and expectations the Shire has of its elected members and employees as public officers, when making public comment both in their professional and personal lives,
- provide a positive public image of Council in line with corporate objectives,
- ensure consistent information is provided to the media and community, in an open and transparent manner,
- ensure Council presents a consistent message,
- maximise media opportunities for Council's achievements and programs, and
- maintain Council's corporate integrity.

This policy also acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of elected members as outlined in the *Local Government Act 1995*.

The Shire acknowledges that everyone has the right to contribute content to public communications and that individuals may use social media in their personal life and does not intend to discourage nor unduly limit personal expression or online activities. However, the potential for damage to be caused (either directly or indirectly) to the Shire in certain circumstances via the use of social media, should be recognised. Accordingly, this policy is to ensure that the risk of such damage is minimised when using social media.

Media engagement and comment

All public statements on behalf of the Shire can only be issued by the Shire President or, if the President permits, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). This is addressed under section 5.41(f) of the *Local Government Act 1995*.

The CEO may refer an issue to another employee where appropriate, including at the request of the Shire President, but only the CEO may direct another employee accordingly.

The Shire President, CEO or authorised person must express the will of the Council and should not in any way present views which are, or could be interpreted as being, inconsistent with the formal decisions or will of the Council.

Elected members are not permitted to speak on behalf of the Council, to the media unless appropriate approval has been granted by the Shire President.

No employee can speak on behalf of the Shire, to journalists or in the media, or through social media outlets, without prior authorisation by the CEO.

The Media and Communications Department shall manage and coordinate all media relations and communications strategies.

In the case of emergency and crisis response, the CEO is to approve protocols which include designated spokespersons, rapid response strategies and channels for disseminating urgent information.

Council shall encourage all media to direct initial enquiries to the Manager Media and Communications, who is responsible for liaising with media and coordinating responses to media enquiries.

Written statements to the media on behalf of Council shall be issued through the Media and Communications Department with approval of the CEO and Shire President prior to its issue.

All quotes included in media releases must be approved by the relevant spokesperson.

Elected members and/or employees who become aware of issues or potential issues that could damage the image or reputation of the Shire, should contact the Shire President or CEO (as appropriate) immediately.

Providing timely information will assist in proactive communication with the media on an issue.

General expectations

- Only disclose and discuss publicly available information.
- Ensure that all content published is accurate and not misleading.
- Expressly state on all postings that the stated views are your own and not those of the Shire.
- Adhere to the Terms of Use of the relevant social media platform/website, as well as copyright, privacy, defamation, contempt of court, discrimination, harassment, and other applicable laws.
- Be polite and respectful to all people you interact with.
- All communications must adhere to high ethical standards, promoting integrity, honesty and respect.
- Do not post or share material that is offensive, obscene, defamatory, threatening, harassing, bullying, discriminatory, hateful, racist, sexist, infringes copyright, constitutes a contempt of court, breaches a Court suppression order, or is otherwise unlawful.
- Do not imply that you are authorised to speak as a representative of the Shire, nor give the impression that the views you express are those of the Shire.
- Do not use the identity or likeness of another.
- Do not use or disclose any confidential information obtained in your capacity.
- Do not use your Shire email address or any logos or insignia that may give the impression of official support or endorsement of your personal comment.
- Do not post or share material that is, or might be construed as, threatening, harassing, bullying or discriminatory towards another.
- Do not make any comment, post, or share any material that might otherwise cause damage to the Shires' reputation or bring it into disrepute.

Elected members

An elected member's right to express an opinion on any issue of public interest is recognised.

Elected members:

- are at liberty to express personal views on any matter which is pertinent to the business of the Shire, including Council decisions, provided they do not purport to represent Council. Elected members are permitted to maintain their own personal social media accounts and tools.

- will refrain from making any negative comments publicly regarding a resolution of Council under any account, profile or page that uses the title of elected member/Councillor.
- may make public statements to the media relating to their own personal matters provided their comments do not imply to represent Council or bring the Council into disrepute.
- should not make comments about the Shire, other elected members, employees or its partners and stakeholders, on their personal social media tools.
- should not make comment or disclose any confidential information relating to employees.

Employees

Employees within the Media and Communications Department are responsible for coordinating Council's media responses and may respond to media enquiries on behalf of Council provided that the enquiry is general in nature and is information freely available to the public.

Employees shall not respond directly to media requests except as authorised within this policy. If an employee receives a request or enquiry directly from the media, the employee shall refer the enquiry to the Manager Media and Communications.

Employees, including employees within the Media and Communications Department, shall not engage in any media activity which is deemed by the CEO to be specifically for the personal advantage of the Shire President, Councillors, or an employee.

Employees should support Council decisions and should refrain from using the media to make negative personal reflections on each other or comment that could be interpreted as such and which are likely to undermine public confidence in the Council or local government.


Employees are entitled to enter public debate and make comment on civic affairs, provided they do not give the impression they are speaking in their official position, for or on behalf of Council.

Should a situation arise where employees are requested to disclose information externally, they should consult with the Manager Media and Communications or the CEO.

Social media

The Shire uses social media and maintains social media accounts to facilitate information sharing and to provide feedback to our community in a relevant and meaningful way and is mindful of the ever increasing and important role of online social media for communication, engagement, and interaction.

Social media will not be used by the Shire to communicate or respond to matters that are complex or relate to a person's or entity's private affairs.



Elected members and employees are permitted to maintain their own personal social media accounts and tools, however, shall not initiate or discuss work related matters on social media.

The Media and Communications Department is responsible for all public social media platforms and members of that team are authorised to distribute information and respond to comments and feedback posted on these platforms.

Engaging in social media on behalf of Council, on social media sites not owned by Council, is not permitted except as approved by the Manager Media and Communications or the CEO. The CEO and/or authorised members of the Media and Communications Department, reserve the right to approve or reject (as they see fit) requests from employees in relation to content to be posted or promoted on Council's social media sites.

Social media should be one component of an overall marketing and communication campaign. If personally approached online regarding a work matter, employees should immediately inform their supervisor and seek advice on how to reply in a way that positively reflects the Shire.

In using social media in a way that identifies their employment with the Shire, employees should be conscious that their online behaviour reflects upon them and the Shire.

When using social media for private purposes, employees must ensure that they make it clear that any comments relating to the Shire's activities are not official, and that they are speaking only on behalf of themselves. Employees must ensure that any personal comments do not compromise their capacity to perform their public role in an unbiased manner.

Although Council considers social media such as, for example Facebook, to be an informal communication channel, we will endeavour to reply to comments that ask a question about Council, or a matter related to Council.

Incorrect information

In the event of incorrect information or information that has a personal or corporate reputation risk being published, the Media and Communications Department will investigate and report to the CEO on how the information came to be published. If necessary, the CEO will issue or will authorise a media release clarifying the incorrect information.

Inappropriate comments

The following is guidance to help you comply with obligations under this policy:

- Persons covered by this policy should only use personal information in their role with the Shire in a manner consistent with this policy. This includes not publishing or reporting conversations or information that is deemed confidential or sensitive.

- The Shire's Directive –Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying applies online and in the physical workplace. Workplace bullying and harassment includes any bullying or harassing comments employees make online, even if on their own private social networks or out of office hours.
- Persons covered by this policy should refrain from publishing material that may cause injury to another person, organisation, association, or company's reputation.
- While performing work duties and during working hours, persons covered by this policy must refrain from posting or watching material that may be offensive or obscene and may infringe relevant laws if it is pornographic, sexually suggestive, harassing, hateful, racist, sexist, abusive, discriminatory or breaches any other legislation.

Breaches

Alleged breaches of this policy will be dealt with in accordance with the Shire's grievance procedures and reports are to be lodged via email at conduct@ashburton.wa.gov.au.

Direct employees breaching this policy may be performance managed up to and including termination of employment and may be exposed to criminal or civil action.

Definitions

Elected members means current elected members (Shire President and Councillors) of the Shire.

Employee means any employee, contractor, volunteer etc. of the Shire.

Direct employee means persons who have a contract of employment with the Shire.

Media means all mediums used for communication including but not limited to, television, radio, newspaper, newsletter, magazine, internet, and social media.

Social media includes internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information among people and communities. It refers to user-generated information, opinion and other content shared and discussed over open digital networks. Social media may include (although it is not limited to):

- Social networking websites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+),
- Video and photo sharing platforms (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, Flickr, YouTube, Tik Tok),
- Blogs, including corporate blogs and personal blogs,
- Blogs hosted by media outlets (e.g., 'comments' or "your say" features on news articles),
- Micro-blogging (e.g., Twitter),

- Wikis and online collaborations (e.g., Wikipedia),
- Forums, discussion boards and groups (e.g., Google groups),
- Video on demand (VOD) and podcasting,
- Online multiplayer gaming platforms,
- Instant messaging (including SMS), and
- Geospatial tagging (e.g., Foursquare, Facebook, Check-in).

Comment includes but is not limited to, public speaking engagements, comments to radio, television, press, online media outlets, views expressed in letters to newspapers or in books, journals, and notices where it is expected that the publication or circulation of the comment will spread to the community at large.

Confidential information is defined as information or data that must be protected from unauthorised access to safeguard the privacy or security of Council.

Relevant policies/documents

[Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates](#)
[Employee Code of Conduct](#)

Directive – Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying

Relevant legislation/local laws

Local Government Act 1995

Section 2.8 Role of mayor or president

Section 2.10 Role of councillors

Section 5.41(f) Functions of CEO

Office use only

Relevant delegations	Nil			
Council adoption	Date	11 October 2022	Resolution #	139/2022
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