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## Objective

To provide a framework for Councillors, staff, delegates and advisers to:

- Ensure all communication with the media is consistent, balanced, well-informed, timely, professional and appropriate
- Clearly indicate Council's authorised spokespersons; limiting the possibility of miscommunication by ensuring comments to the media relating to Council are made only through those authorised spokespersons
- Improve communication with customers and enhance Council's public image

## Introduction

Mid-Western Regional Council recognises that a well-run, competent, ethical and reputable organisation is the best way to promote a favourable image and that any public relations program is only as good as the organisation behind it.

Council will take advantage of interest from the media to further its reputation and inform the public about Council's activities. Council will also proactively distribute information to the media to communicate information about Council's activities and decisions. In dealing with the media, Councillors and Council officers must be careful to communicate accurate information.

Council welcomes enquiries from the media. All media representatives are to be treated in the same manner as any other customer of Council. That is, Council will attend to media requests promptly and with courtesy, honesty and respect. Council believes that a good relationship based on trust, familiarity and confidence is important between Council and the media.

## Related policies and plans

- Mid-Western Regional Council Social Media Policy
- Mid-Western Regional Council Code of Conduct
- Mid-Western Regional Council Electronic Telecommunications – Acceptable Use
- Mid-Western Regional Council Community Engagement Strategy
- Mid-Western Regional Council Community Engagement Policy

## Policy

Dealing with media enquiries

1. The Mayor, General Manager, Director Operations, Director Development, Director Community, Manager Economic Development and the Marketing & Communications Coordinator are Council's official spokespersons on all matters. Only the General Manager or his nominee may nominate other staff to act as spokespeople for the Council.
2. Council's Marketing & Communications Coordinator is responsible for coordinating media liaison and has been delegated authority to respond to media enquiries on behalf of Council.
3. No staff member, other than Council's authorised spokespeople listed in paragraph 1 above are to handle an enquiry from the media without prior approval from the General Manager.
4. Information given to the media requires the approval of the General Manager.
5. The Marketing & Communications Coordinator is responsible for issuing media releases about Council's activities, decisions and plans subject to the General Manager's approval.
6. All staff are required to pass on important information to the Marketing & Communications Coordinator which could be used as the basis for a media release or internal communication. The Marketing & Communications Coordinator in consultation with other staff members will decide if the information warrants a media release and/or photo or other treatment.
7. Information that Council officers wish to communicate to the media is to be distributed by the Marketing & Communications Coordinator only.
8. All staff are required to advise the Marketing & Communications Coordinator of any issues that may create interest for media in a timely manner, including but not limited to media attending events, information regarding topical issues and other potential areas of interest for the community. If the Marketing & Communications Coordinator is unavailable the issue should be escalated to the Manager Economic Development, and in their absence to the Director Development.

### Councillors and the media

1. In their role as elected representatives, Councillors may talk to the media and utilise social media at any time on any issue of interest in accordance with the Code of Conduct.
2. Every Councillor has a right to express a private opinion on any issue, whether or not that opinion reflects Council's official position but Councillors must carefully identify the role in which they speak.
3. Whenever Councillors publicly express their own opinions they must make it clear they are speaking for themselves, and not for Council, unless they are supporting a Council position.
4. When Councillors speak on behalf of Council they must express and support Council's entire policy on the issue at hand.
5. Any Councillor who feels unable to speak enthusiastically in support of a Council policy while formally representing Council faces a dilemma and must treat it in a similar fashion to a conflict of interest issue.
6. The Marketing & Communications Coordinator will make him or herself available for consultation with the Mayor and Councillors if and when required.

### Speaking to the media

1. Councillors and Council staff are encouraged to co-operate at all times with media outlets subject to the guidelines provided in this policy and to be proactive, as opposed to reactive, in their use of the media.
2. All media enquiries to staff should be directed to the Council's Marketing & Communications Coordinator who will then contact the relevant Director or the General Manager.
3. Council staff must not speak to the media or use social media to communicate about matters related to Council unless authorised to do so by the General Manager, a Director, the Manager Economic Development or the Marketing & Communications Coordinator.
4. Council employees and Councillors may not provide any comment or information to the media or use social media with the intention of contesting or undermining Council policy or casting Council, Councillors or Council staff in a negative light.
5. Council employees may speak to the media, use social media or write Letters to the Editor as private individuals with the following restrictions:
  - They do not comment on Council business or policy;
  - They are not identified as Council employees;
  - Their comments are not perceived as representing official Council position or policy.
6. In the event of an industrial dispute (or an incident likely to lead to an industrial dispute), statements on behalf of Council employees should be issued via the relevant union.
7. Councillors and Council staff should not provide information off the record. Everything said to any media representative and anything communicated by social media may appear in a news story.
8. Contractors, volunteers or service providers employed by Council must refer all media enquiries relating to Council to the Marketing & Communications Coordinator.

## Media releases

1. Under no circumstances should a media release be issued quoting a Councillor or member of staff without that person's approval.
2. All Media releases and Alerts are to be issued to the Customer Service Team for their information.
3. Written media releases must be distributed to Councillors and Executive Team at least 2 hours prior to being released to the media.
4. Councillors must not forward media releases to media outlets or publish on social media until after the original media release is publicly issued by the Marketing & Communications Coordinator.

## Responding to criticism

Criticism about media content or the use of social media should be forwarded to the Marketing & Communications Coordinator. Formal complaints about media content on behalf of Council staff should only be made by the General Manager in consultation with the Marketing & Communications Coordinator.

## Crisis and issues communication

In the event of an emergency or infrastructure failure in the Council area, the following procedures will apply:

1. The Marketing & Communications Coordinator and Manager Economic Development must be notified immediately of details of the incident by telephone and/or SMS message.
2. Details of the incident must not be discussed with any media representatives by any staff unless approved in advance by the General Manager.
3. The Marketing & Communications Coordinator or Manager Economic Development will issue a media alert (in business hours) directly to media outlining key impacts and directions for residents. Councillors and Executive Team will be sent a copy of this alert simultaneously. Out of business hours, media are notified of critical incidents through social media posts published by the on call communications staff or Manager Economic Development to Council's Facebook page. Local Media notified by SMS or email.
4. Requests by media to film, photograph or interview Council staff or Council assets involved in the emergency situation must be referred to the General Manager or the Marketing & Communications Coordinator for approval.

## Community newsletter

While editorial coverage in independent media plays an important role, such reporting will always be limited due to limits on space, distribution quality and competition of news. Final decisions about stories published or broadcast by independent media are made by those media outlets, not Council. As such, Council needs a regularly published and widely distributed newsletter to communicate effectively to residents.

This communication is primarily undertaken via Council's newsletter and official news publication, the *Mid-Western Regional Council Community News*, a free printed newsletter and digital content publication distributed as directed by Council.

The core objectives of the production of a community newsletter are for Council to:

- Engage effectively with local residents, keep them informed and obtain their views with ongoing consultation.
- Provide a framework for Council advertising to assure widest possible distribution.
- Promote a range of services and activities for the benefit of the Council and the Mid-Western Region community.

Community News will inform the public about policies, services, activities, events and other matters in an attractive, balanced, objective and accessible format. Specific editorial goals are:

1. To raise the profile of and seek feedback on key issues of Council, promote the Council's services and encourage greater involvement by residents in local democracy.
2. To inform the public about the work of Council, its policies, services, activities and events in an attractive, balanced and accessible format.
3. To explain how rate payers' money is spent by reporting on achievements and measuring them against the goals of the Delivery Program and Operational Plan.

4. To improve consultation and encourage participation in the democratic process by seeking the views of local residents on Council services, plans, proposals and priorities.
5. To provide a civic vehicle through which other non-profit community service agencies and government bodies can distribute information to the Mid-Western community.

Editorial direction for Community News will be determined by the Marketing & Communications Coordinator in consultation with the General Manager. Elected Councillors will exercise oversight of the content of the newsletter as part of the General Manager's performance review meeting or at more regular meetings if Council becomes concerned that the direction of Community News is not neutral and not meeting the goals of this policy.

Community News and other newsletters will not be used to promote the achievements or plans of a Councillor or group of Councillors or as a political platform by any Councillor or member of staff.

Community News will be produced in-house by Council staff. The Marketing & Communications Coordinator and General Manager have the final decision on content.

## Delegations

In the absence of the Marketing & Communications Coordinator, all responsibilities will be performed by the Manager Economic Development and/or Director Development.