



Media and Communications Policy





Table of Contents

1. Purpose	2
2. Policy Scope.....	2
3. Definitions	2
4. Related Legislation, Guidance and Policies	3
5. Policy Objectives	4
6. Policy Statement	4
7. Standards of conduct when engaging with the media	4
8. Roles and Responsibilities	5
9. Use of media during emergencies	7
10. Media engagement in the lead up to elections	7
11. Records management	7
12. Document Governance Information	8
13. Review	8



1. Purpose

Bellingen Shire Council is committed to keeping its local and wider community well informed about its activities.

To achieve this outcome Council recognises that a good working relationship with the media is essential and the purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for effective communication of Council affairs to the community via the media.

Council is committed to upholding and promoting the following principles of media engagement:

Openness	We will ensure that we promote an open exchange of information between our Council and the media.
Consistency	We will ensure consistency by all Councillors and staff when communicating with the media.
Accuracy	The information we share with the media will be a source of truth for our Council and community and we will prioritise the need to correct inaccuracies when they occur.
Timeliness	We will ensure that we respond to media enquiries in a timely manner.

2. Policy Scope

This policy applies to all Councillors and Council workers.

3. Definitions

The following definitions apply throughout this policy.

Act	means the <i>Local Government Act 1993</i> (NSW).
Code of Conduct	means the Code of Conduct adopted by Council.
Council	means Bellingen Shire Council.
Councillor	means a person elected or appointed to civic office as a member of the governing body of council who is not suspended, including the mayor.
Media	includes print media (such as national or local newspapers, magazines, newsletters, brochures and other documents) and the broadcast media (including radio and television broadcasters) and internet publishers.
Public Comment	includes interviews with the media (including comments to, or interviews with, the press, radio, or television), public speaking engagements and expressing views in letters to the press, in book, notices, articles or in any medium where it is reasonably foreseeable that the publication or circulation will enter the public domain.
Worker	means an employee, a contractor or subcontractor, an employee of a contractor or subcontractor, a student gaining work experience or a volunteer.



4. Related Legislation, Guidance and Policies

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the following legislation:

- Local Government Act 1993 (NSW)
- Local Government (General) Regulation 2021
- NSW Environmental, Planning & Assessment Act 1979
- Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000
- Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009 (GIPA)
- Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act (NSW) 1998 (PPIPA)

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the following NSW Government publications:

- Code of Conduct for Councils in NSW
- Privacy Management Plan

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the following Council documents:

- Bellingen Shire Council Code of Conduct
- Bellingen Shire Council Social Media Policy
- Bellingen Shire Council Community Engagement Policy
- Bellingen Shire Council Community Engagement Strategy
- Bellingen Shire Council Records Management Policy
- Bellingen Shire Council Disaster Communications Plan



5. Policy Objectives

The Media Policy has the following objectives:

- 5.1** To ensure consistency by Councillors and staff in dealing with the media.
- 5.2** To promote open exchange of information between Council and the media.
- 5.3** To promote positive media relationships.
- 5.4** To ensure all communication with the media is consistent, well informed, timely and appropriate.
- 5.5** To clearly indicate Council's authorised spokespersons.
- 5.6** To ensure appropriate authorisation and responsibility for information provided.

6. Policy Statement

- 6.1** Council encourages open communication with the media and the community, with an emphasis on promoting a positive, progressive, and professional image of Council and staff.
- 6.2** Council will openly discuss matters of interest with the media unless disclosure of information contravenes the Council's duty of care, contractual obligations, or could infringe laws or regulations that govern its operations (or the privacy of any individual).
- 6.3** Media organisations and their representatives will be treated equally and without bias.
- 6.4** Media enquiries are to be dealt with promptly, truthfully and within the media's deadline wherever possible, provided adequate notice has been given.
- 6.5** Only the General Manager and Mayor (or their delegated representative/s) has permission to speak to the media as official spokespersons of Council.
- 6.6** In the case of matters with possible legal consequences, that is, official investigations, accidents, or enquiries into business dealings or actions, any statements made to the media must be authorised by the General Manager with the input and approval of legal counsel.
- 6.7** Council representatives will not knowingly provide information to the media which is untruthful or inaccurate.
- 6.8** As elected community representatives, Councillors may express their personal view on any matter to the media.

7. Standards of conduct when engaging with the media

- 7.1** Council officials must comply with the Council's code of conduct when engaging with the media in an official capacity or in connection with their role as a Council official.
- 7.2** Council officials must not share information or make comments to the media through either direct or indirect mechanisms that:
 - a) are defamatory, offensive, humiliating, threatening, or intimidating to other Council officials or members of the public
 - b) contains profane language or is sexual in nature
 - c) constitutes harassment and/or bullying within the meaning of Council's Code of, or is unlawfully discriminatory



- d) 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
- e) contains content about the Council, Council officials or members of the public that is misleading or deceptive
- f) divulges confidential Council information
- g) breaches the privacy of other Council officials or members of the public
- h) contains allegations of suspected breaches of the Council's code of conduct or information about the consideration of a matter under the Procedures for the Administration of the Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW
- i) could be perceived to be an official comment on behalf of the Council where they have not been authorised to make such comment
- j) commits the Council to any action
- k) violates an order made by a court
- l) breaches copyright
- m) advertises, endorses, or solicits commercial products or business.

8. Roles and Responsibilities

The Mayor and/or the General Manager are the official spokespersons for the Council on all matters. The General Manager may nominate other staff to act as spokespeople for the Council.

8.1 The General Manager

- a) The General Manager is the official spokesperson for the Council on operational and administrative matters.
- b) The General Manager may delegate to other Council staff to speak on their behalf where appropriate (for example, where the delegated staff member has professional expertise regarding the subject matter, or the General Manager is unavailable).

8.2 The Mayor

The Mayor is the principal member and spokesperson of the governing body of the Council, including representing the views of the Council as to its local priorities (section 225(c) of the Local Government Act 1993).

- a) If the Mayor is unavailable, the Deputy Mayor may act as the Council's spokesperson.
- b) The Mayor may delegate their role as spokesperson to the Councillors where appropriate (for example, where another Councillor is best placed to comment, because the issue is of particular interest to them, or its within their particular area of expertise).

8.3 Councillors

As a member of the governing body and as a representative of the community, Councillors are free to express their personal views to the media. However, statements made by Councillors are to be identified as their opinions only and as such do not necessarily represent the position of the Council.

- a) When engaging with the media, Councillors:
 - must not purport to speak for the Council unless authorised to do so
 - 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)
 - must uphold and accurately represent the policies and decisions of the Council



- must not disclose Council information unless authorised to do so, and
 - should seek information and guidance from the General 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.
- b) In the interests of promoting a positive, safe and harmonious organisational culture, Councillors should endeavour to resolve personal differences privately and must not prosecute them publicly through the media.
- c) Where Councillors (including the Mayor) become aware of potential issues that could result in media interest, they should provide this information to the General Manager.
- d) The Mayor and Councillors should, out of courtesy, inform the General Manager of comments provided to the media.
- e) Councillors must direct any questions about their obligations under this policy to the General Manager.

8.4 Media Coordinator

The General Manager will appoint one or more suitably qualified members of Council staff to be the Council's Media Coordinator.

The Media Coordinator's role is to:

- a) be the 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
- b) be responsible for preparing all media statements prior to their release
- c) liaise with relevant staff members within the organisation where appropriate
- d) ensure that media statements are approved by the General Manager prior to their release
- e) develop media training and inductions provided to relevant staff and Councillors
- f) maintain a record of all media enquiries and responses
- g) ensure that media organisations and their representatives are treated professionally, equally and without bias
- h) ensure that media enquiries are dealt with promptly
- i) provide guidance to Councillors approached by the media for comment to avoid communication of misinformation, and
- j) ensure that all media releases are published on the Council's website.

8.5 Council Workers

- a) Council workers are not permitted to speak with the media without prior permission from the General Manager or his/her delegate.
- b) If Council staff receive a media enquiry or they are invited to comment to the media on a matter relating to the Council, they must refer the enquiry to the General Manager. Workers may express their views in a public debate in their capacity as a local citizen and not as a Council representative, unless authorised. However, staff should avoid any perception of a conflict of interest and take care not to give the impression that the comments are made on behalf of Belling Shire Council.
- c) If authorised to speak to the media, Council staff:
 - must 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/Media Coordinator, and
 - must seek information and guidance from the General Manager/ Media Coordinator 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



- d) Where Council staff become aware of potential issues that could result in media interest, they should provide this information to the General Manager.
- e) The Communication and Engagement Lead will ensure that all staff and the community have access to Council media releases in a timely fashion via the Council website.

9. Use of media during emergencies

- 9.1** During emergencies, such as natural disasters or public health incidents, the Communications Lead will be responsible for coordinating media releases and statements on behalf of the Council as set out in the Disaster Communications Plan.
- 9.2** Councillors, Council staff and other Council officials 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.

10. Media engagement in the lead up to elections

- 10.1** This policy does not prevent the 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 the election.
- 10.2** During a period of 40 days prior to an election, Council must not publish any media containing the name, images or statements of the Mayor or Councillors who are candidates.
- 10.3** In addition to Clause 10.2, and in accordance with the Code of Conduct for Councils in NSW, Councillors must not use Council resources (including council staff), property or facilities for the purpose of assisting their election campaign or the election campaigns of others unless the resources, property or facilities are otherwise available for use or hire by the public and any publicly advertised fee is paid for use of the resources, property or facility.
- 10.4** Councillors must not use the Council letterhead, Council crests, Council email or social media or other information that could give the appearance it is official council material:
 - a) for the purpose of assisting their election campaign or the election campaign of others, or
 - b) for other non-official purposes.

11. Records management

Media content created and received by Council officials (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 the Council's approved records management policies and practices.



12. Document Governance Information

12.1 Document Management Information

Document Type:	Council Policy
Document Name:	Media and Communications Policy
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Section / Department:	Organisational Strategy & Communication
Responsible Officer:	Communication & Engagement Lead
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12.2 Strategic Alignment

Community Vision 2035	5 Civic Leadership
Objective	5.2 Our community is informed and engaged with a strong sense of civic leadership
Strategy	5.3.2 We engage

13. Review

This Council Policy should be reviewed at least every four years or as required due to significant legislative changes.