

Policy

The Upper Hunter Shire 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.

This Policy provides a framework that guides how the Upper Hunter Shire Council (UHSC) communicates with the community to ensure information is accurate, consistent and timely. Council acknowledges that the effective dissemination of information and communication is a vital element in building a positive identity for Council through greater community awareness of its services, activities, achievements and resources.

This policy also identifies structured lines of authority for providing comment to the media on behalf of UHSC.

Objective

- Provide the community with information that is timely, clear, accurate and concise.
- Provide regular and consistent communication on Council's projects and activities.
- Create a positive and professional image for Council through increased community awareness and understanding of Council's role and responsibilities in the community.
- Increase community interest and support for Council activities.
- Facilitate community engagement through provision of accurate and timely information to the community via traditional, digital and emerging media.

Procedures/Practice

1 Media protocols

1.1 Authorised Spokespersons

The Mayor and the General Manager are the authorised spokespersons on Council affairs, including comment on official opinion and information that may be of a controversial, legal or ethical nature.

The Mayor is empowered under the Local Government Act 1993 to carry out civic and ceremonial functions of Council. Accordingly, the Mayor, and on occasion the Deputy Mayor, may appear in the media as representatives of the Council.

Under some circumstances, Council Directors and Council's Communications Team may be given authority by the General Manager to provide information to the media on operational matters.

Any information provided to the media including media releases, letters, emails and records of discussions must be registered in Council's records system.

1.2 Dealing with Media Enquiries

All media enquiries should be directed to Council's Communications Team. The Communications Team is responsible for coordinating Council's media liaison.

Journalists may on occasion contact an officer directly. No staff member, other than those authorised, has approval to handle any enquiry from the media and must refer the matter to the Communications Team without providing a comment.

Under no circumstances can Councillors or Council employees, contractors, volunteers and community representatives discuss staff, confidential legal advice or commercial inconfidence matters with the media. Improper release of personal and/or confidential information is a breach of the Code of Conduct.

1.3 Councillors and the Media

It is commonplace for Councillors to be asked by the media to comment on Council policy or decisions. Only the Mayor and General Manager are permitted to speak on behalf of Council.

Individual Councillors may make statements to the media, provided it is clearly stated that the comment reflects their personal opinion and not that of Council. When information is supplied to the media including letters, emails, verbal etc, a copy of the correspondence or written record of the enquiry/conversation and the response provided should be forwarded immediately to the General Manager's Office and registered in Council's Records system.

Councillors should not include personal criticism of other Councillors or Council Staff in comments to the media including social media or distribute unauthorised information. Defamation law covers Councillors as it does everyone else. It could be considered defamatory to harm another person's reputation verbally or through the written word.

2 Communication Procedures

2.1 Media Releases/Alerts

The purpose of a media release is to attract media coverage for an event, project, or Council decision. Coverage of media releases is not guaranteed, it is up to the editors discretion.

Media alerts can be sent out prior to an event to invite media to attend. Council staff should advise the Communications Team of forthcoming public events to enable media to be alerted with sufficient time to allocate journalists.

Media releases must be sent to the General Manager and Mayor for approval prior to distribution. The General Manager can approve media releases on operational matters of Council without requiring the Mayor's approval.

Where a media release is prepared by another organisation, which relates to a Council project or in which Council is involved, it must be forwarded to the Communications Team before it is released.

2.2 Advertising

Council will meet statutory obligations in communicating with citizens, ratepayers and the wider community, including but not limited to:

a) Tenders - Must be published in at least one metropolitan and one local paper.

b) Recruitment - Advertisements will be placed with consideration given to enabling sufficient candidates to apply. This may include internal and/or external advertising in print and online. Senior staff recruitment advertisements are required to be published at least twice in a daily newspaper circulating throughout the state (Local Government Act 1993 - Sect 348). All recruitment advertising should consider Council's Equal Employment Opportunity policy.

c) Public notices - Notices must be advertised providing details of place, dates and times that the notice refers to. (Local Government Act 1993 - Sect 705).

d) Annual Report - Council will communicate openly and effectively with its citizens through the publication of a comprehensive Annual Report within five months of the end of the financial year. (Local Government Act 1993 - Sect 428).

e) Development notification - Council will not notify or advertise applications for proposals which, in the opinion of Council's senior development assessment staff, are unlikely to have an impact or to have a very minor impact on the locality. All other applications will be notified, such as development applications, applications to modify development consent (s.96), applications to review the determination of an application (s.82A), rezonings and new planning policies.

2.3 Social Media

Council recognises the benefits of using social media as a means for marketing, promotion and disseminating time-sensitive information to the widest possible audience. It is acknowledged that certain risks are associated with social media tools.

Social Media includes all internet-based publishing technologies. Forms of Social Media include, but are not limited to, social or business networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), video and/or photo sharing websites (i.e. YouTube, Flickr), business/corporate and personal blogs, micro-blogs (i.e. Twitter), chat rooms, forums and emails.

Administrators of Council social media sites must be authorised by the Corporate Communications Coordinator.

Administrators are required to monitor sites within their responsibility daily during the week. Social Media does not need to be monitored over the weekend.

Comments from the community should be addressed as soon as possible, as a guideline responses should be provided within a maximum timeframe of forty eight hours with the exception of weekends.

All social media accounts administered by Council officers as part of their employment shall remain under the control of Council. Log in and password details must be provided to records, IT and the Communications Team.

Councillors

As members of the community, Councillors are entitled to use social media sites to enter into public debate in their private capacity and make comment on Council affairs provided they clearly state that such public comment reflects their personal opinion and not that of the Council or a committee of Council.

Privacy

Information published online is in the public domain. Users of council sites are entitled to expect that any information as a result of that use will be treated within the terms of the Council's privacy responsibilities and obligations. The Council's privacy practices are regulated by the New South Wales Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998.

Retransmission of Information

Council's following of other social media accounts or the retransmission of information through its site does not imply a formal endorsement or recommendation by Council. It is provided for the information and convenience of other users and such sites and associated content are not under the control of Upper Hunter Shire Council.

The inclusion of any link does not imply endorsement of that website, service or person by Upper Hunter Shire Council.

Council endeavours to maintain the currency and accuracy of information published on its social media sites, however, it does not guarantee that the information is accurate, complete, or current, or that the data is free from defects or malicious code such as viruses. It is advisable that users ascertain the currency of information immediately prior to use. Upper Hunter Shire Council disclaims all responsibility for any loss or damage which may arise from the use of this channel.

2.4 Website

Upper Hunter Shire Council has developed a website for the provision and distribution of services and information to local residents and to the broader community. The website can be located at www.upperhunter.nsw.gov.au

All information posted to Council's website should be consistent with the corporate image of Council and should represent Council as a responsible provider of online information.

The content of Council's website should be updated regularly.

All material intended for public access should be made available online. Content should be original, accurate, current and appropriate to the intended audience. Information which is not easily electronically accessible must be discoverable through the website with a brief summary of the information and how to gain access to it.

The NSW Anti-Discrimination Act prohibits the discrimination against any individual on the basis of the grounds of marital status, sexual preference, race, colour, religious identity, descent, age, or disability. Material, which breaches this Act, must not be included on Council's website.

The Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998 provides protection for individuals against the unauthorised use of personal data stored electronically. Permission must be obtained from any individual prior to the publication of any information relating to them.

All content should abide by Council's Code of Conduct.

The website is copyright to the Upper Hunter Shire Council and should contain appropriate disclaimers.

Customer Requests, Complaints, Compliments and Feedback

The Council website will be viewed as a primary communication and engagement tool between Council and its communities, and as such it will provide a facility to capture complaints, compliments, suggestions and feedback as well as general customer requests for action.

The Website Coordinator has the responsibility for the overall site creation, maintenance and publishing using the Communication guidelines.

Senior Staff including the General Manager, Directors and Managers have the right to direct the removal of any content, which does not meet the publishing standards or is in breach of the Code of Conduct or this Policy.

2.5 Crisis Communication

Council recognises that ill considered and uninformed comments can cause dire consequences and legal implications in the event of an emergency, disaster, crisis, or sensitive issue. Accordingly, only the Mayor and General Manager are authorised to speak to the media on these occasions.

2.6 Corporate branding

Council's corporate branding, including the Council logo, are the property of the Upper Hunter Shire Council. Council's corporate branding represents Council to the community, therefore use requires prior approval in order to protect and enhance Council's role and reputation.

The use of the Council logo by outside organisations is permitted only in cases where the use is set out in agreements or express written permission has been obtained from the General Manager. This includes, but is not limited to printed form (eg letters, advertisements, flyers, pamphlets etc) or electronic (eg emails, websites, social networking sites etc). Council will not approve use of corporate images by external organisations if the use may reflect negatively on Council or bring it into disrepute.

Council requires that corporate images are:

- reproduced without alteration or modification. There is to be no manipulation of individual elements, including colour, in any way. Tilting, compressing or expanding the logo components is not acceptable. The elements of design and text are integral components of the logo device and must not be deleted or modified.
- the logo is used strictly in accordance with agreed use and not to be used so as to infer endorsement of commercial products or services, unless agreed. Any request for permission should be made in writing and include details about where and how the logo will appear. A copy of final artwork must be submitted with any request.

Permission may be withdrawn for non-compliance with the above conditions. Council may seek a legal remedy for any unauthorised use of its corporate images.

Councillors and corporate branding

Councillors do not have the authority under the Local Government Act to officially represent the Council in their own capacity, except where expressly authorised by resolution of the Council.

Councillors are not permitted to use Council's branding, including the logo, in printed form (eg letters) or electronic (eg emails, websites, social networking sites etc) without authority of the General Manager.

Under the Code of Conduct, Councillors are not permitted to use Council letterheads, Council's logo or Council resources to create the appearance it is from Council for the purpose of assisting any election campaigns or for other non-official purposes.

2.7 Photographs

This section applies to anyone recording images (still or video) on behalf of Council including Council staff, Councillors and contracted photographers. This policy and related procedures should

be followed anytime an image is recorded for Council purposes including:

- use in promotional materials
- use in corporate documents
- use on any website or social media channel maintained by Council
- adding to an image library for future use
- keeping records of an event or activity
- any other Council use.

It is not intended to cover recording of images in the Upper Hunter Shire by people outside of Council (e.g. local newspaper photographers) for non-Council purposes.

According to Australian law, recording images of people in public spaces is legal, as long as those images are not used for a commercial purpose.

As a government and not a commercial entity, Council can legally use images it takes in a public space. It is Council's responsibility to its constituents to ensure their personal information (including their likeness) is treated with respect. Where possible, people should be made aware they are being photographed for Council promotional purposes. Sometimes it is enough to post a sign or make an announcement at an event to indicate a Council photographer is on site and taking photos.

Copyright

Council owns the copyright for all the images in Council's image library taken using Council resources.

Other organisations sometimes request the use of one of Council's images. Consult with the Corporate Communications Coordinator before sending a Council image to another entity. Council may be able to share images with non-commercial organisations working in a joint project with Council, but it does not share images for commercial use (except in limited circumstances as decided by the Communications Coordinator, and only with express permission of the subject of the image).


References

- Upper Hunter Shire Council Communications Policy Guidelines
- Local Government Act 1993
- Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998
- Defamation Act, 2005
- Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009
- Copyright Act 1968 (Cth)
- This is a new policy adopted by Council at its meeting on 26 October 2015.

Review Date

October 2017 by the Corporate Communications Coordinator.

Authorised by:


Waid Crockett, General Manager

27/10/15
Date