



## ESC – C008 Media Communications Policy

### POLICY VERSION AND REVISION

Version History	Meeting date	
Post-Election Meeting - Dated 11 April 2016 Resolution No. 2016/GM006	14 <sup>th</sup> August 2024	
	Resolution number	
	#24.08.09	
Approval by CEO		
Effective date	Review date	
14 <sup>th</sup> August 2024	30 <sup>th</sup> July 2028	
Policy Author		
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## 1. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Etheridge Shire Council's interaction with the media requires careful management and a consistent and proactive approach. The development of clear processes around media interaction and factors such as: target publics, political sensitivity and public interest are essential in maintaining a positive organisational reputation and serve the interests of all stakeholders.

## 2. PURPOSE & SCOPE

### Intent

This protocol is intended to clarify the appropriate process for:

1. Preparing / releasing media statements (proactive).
2. Responding to media enquiries (reactive).

### Principles:

- Council acknowledges the important role that media interaction plays in community engagement.
- Council respects the principle of freedom of the press and the right of media outlets to report on Council matters in a manner that they consider appropriate.
- Council will seek positive relationships with media outlets to ensure that balanced and objective reporting of Council matters is achieved.
- As a general rule, Council will not respond to "Letters to the Editor", unless a gross inaccuracy requires explicit correction.
- Staff contact with editorial media other than that authorised under this policy is prohibited.
- Council respects the democratic decision-making process prescribed at law for local government in Queensland and respects the right of individual Councillors to debate against a motion, vote against a motion and/or record their dissent where appropriate. However, Council also respects the long-standing convention of all Councillors publicly supporting the consensus decision-making process, regardless of their viewpoint on a particular matter.
- This protocol does not purport to restrict Councillors from making statements, or from responding to media enquiries they may receive. However, should Councillors intend to make statements reflecting personal/political opinion, or, that are in some way contrary to published Council position, such remarks should be qualified accordingly.

## 3. DEFINITIONS

Council: Etheridge Shire Council

Communication: Refers to all forms of communication with the media and similar outlets including, but not limited to, interviews, press statements, emails, facsimiles, letters, policies etc.

Councillor: All elected representatives who hold current office with Council, including the Mayor.

Employees: Includes a person who carries out work in any capacity for Council (i.e. temporary or permanent employee, contractor, sub-contractor, employee of a labour hire company, outworker, trainee, apprentice, volunteer, work experience student).

Media: communication of news widely to the public via print (includes web sites), radio or television.

Public Relations: the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest, and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance, **(PR News)**.

Media Release (or news release): a written or recorded communication issued to the media to inform them of information the organisation has deemed as possessing news value to attract favorable media attention



## 4. POLICY PROVISIONS

Council encourages open, prompt and accurate communication with the media to promote a positive, progressive and professional image of Council.

It is the policy of Council to provide relevant, timely and accurate comment and information to media outlets when requested.

### Preparing / Releasing Media Statements (Proactive)

1. The Mayor is Council's official spokesperson and has primary responsibility for communicating decisions of Council or its position on a particular issue.
2. At the Mayor's/Chief Executive Officer's discretion, media statements may also be prepared in the following manner:
  - a) If the matter being reported has been initiated by a particular Councillor, or has origins of obvious significance to that Councillor's pursuits (ie. matter relates to a Council-appointed committee of which the Councillor is a member), that Councillor would be nominated as Council's spokesperson.
  - b) Alternatively, if the matter has a specialized or technical component, the Mayor / Chief Executive Officer may call on a senior officer for input and approve that the remarks be attributed accordingly.
3. Persons to whom comments are attributed are to approve any media release in advance.
4. As a matter of courtesy, copies of final releases are to be distributed to Councillors, the Chief Executive Officer, relevant Director and relevant operational staff (including those likely to have customer contact on the matter) prior to publication. In practice, this will generally occur (by e-mail) at the same time as the item is released to media outlets.
5. Where time permits, items of a politically sensitive nature are to be distributed to Councillors to provide them with the opportunity to review the statements prior to release. It is recognised that this is not always possible.

### Responding to Media Enquiries (Reactive)

1. The Mayor is Council's official spokesperson and has primary responsibility for communicating decisions of Council or its position on a particular issue.
2. All editorial media enquiries and requests for media comment should be directed to the Chief Executive Office in the first instance where the Mayor will be offered the first opportunity to respond. On those occasions where the Mayor is unavailable or sees fit that another person respond, the following general guidelines will be used by the Chief Executive Officer in allocating responsibility:
  - a) If the matter being reported has been initiated by a particular Councillor, or has origins of obvious significance to that Councillor's pursuits (ie. matter relates to a Council-appointed committee of which the Councillor is a member), that Councillor would be nominated as Council's spokesperson.
  - b) Alternatively, if the matter has a specialized or technical component, the Chief Executive Officer or senior officer may respond.
3. Where the matter is of a sensitive nature, spokespeople authorised under this policy are encouraged to consider seeking the opportunity to provide a written response to specific questions.
4. In any case, where comment is made to the media, spokespeople are requested to notify their colleagues (Councillors) and the Chief Executive Officer for information.



## **Official Spokesperson**

The Mayor is the official spokesperson for all media items issued from Etheridge Shire Council. At the Mayor's discretion this responsibility can be delegated to another Councillor or Council Officer.

The Chief Executive Officer is the official spokesperson for all staff-related or organisational issues.

The Chief Executive Officer, at their discretion, will delegate the responsibility to another Council Officer where appropriate.

**Interacting with the Media** The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for and must authorise paid advertisements, social media pages, community notices and promotional material prepared by Council.

Council employees are not permitted to engage with the media about any Council-related matter without authority from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

This policy is not intended to limit a Councillor from communicating with or engaging with their constituents. Councillors are actively encouraged to do this, provided that the Councillor Code of Conduct requirements are complied with. In doing so, Councillors need identify that they are not speaking on behalf of Council.

This policy does not preclude Councillors from making their own statements or comments which may conflict with Council's position, or on matters that are not current Council programs or initiatives. In these scenarios, Councillors must be aware of their Code of Conduct obligations by ensuring that their comments are not portrayed by them as the official view of Council.

## **Requests for Information**

Some journalists may request background information for news items. All staff should refer reporters to the Chief Executive Officer.

With Mayoral or Chief Executive Officer approval, council officers and staff are authorised to provide background information to journalists but cannot be quoted. This should be stated to the journalist at the beginning and end of the discussion and requests for quotes forwarded to the Mayor, Chief Executive Officer or relevant Councillor.

When staff become aware of sensitive or reactive issues that may encourage media attention they should contact the Chief Executive Officer immediately with the details.

At **no point** should Council staff provide personal comment on, or speculate about Council decisions to the media.

## **'Off-the-record' Comments**

Etheridge Shire Council does not provide 'off-the-record' comments. Often these types of comments flag an issue for further/greater media attention. A good journalist will try and get the same information 'on-the-record' from another source and these sources may be less accurate or appropriate. If it is not suitable for the information to be provided to the public, leave it out of all conversations with the media.

## **Record-Keeping**

All media releases, responses to media or external requests for statements, information etc., must be recorded and stored according to Council's records management policy and procedures.

## **Non-Compliance**

Non-compliance with the provisions of this policy may result in disciplinary action being taken in accordance with Council's policies and procedures.

## **5. RELATED DOCUMENTATION**

*Local Government Act 2009;*

*Local Government Regulation 2012*