6.10.1 Media guidelines and procedures

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Introduction

The media is a conduit to the public and a means by which Bega Valley Shire Council can promote itself and its various projects and initiatives to the community through the use of interesting, factual and up-to-date information.

Council has employed a Communications Coordinator since 2012 to manage the strategic directions and staff of Council’s communications team.

The following procedure is designed to strengthen and build on Council’s existing relationship with the media and to ensure there is some consistency in the way that individual Councillors and Council staff deal with the media on a day to day basis.

Speaking to the Media

All media enquiries to staff should be directed to Council’s Communications Coordinator who will then contact the relevant person in the best position to comment.

Council officers can speak to the media about specific projects and initiatives but should first obtain the approval of their Manager or Director and clear the issue with Council’s Communications Coordinator.

Outdoor workers approached by the media for information on the job/project they are working on should refer those enquiries to the Works Manager.

1. In their line of work, Council employees should not provide comment or information to the media with the intention of contesting or undermining Council policy or casting Council, Councillors or Council staff in a negative light. This includes comments made on personal social media pages.
2. 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.
3. When appropriate in official Council media releases, a Councillor or member of staff should become sole spokesperson on a specific issue, event or initiative to ensure consistency of message.
4. Wherever possible, Councillors should be given the opportunity to comment on Council decisions, projects and initiatives. Preference should be given to the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor or chairperson of the relevant committee (i.e. General Purposes, Finance and Works, Planning and Environment, Community Services).
5. Councillors are free to talk to the media at any time on issues of interest. However they should always do so with the best interests of the organisation in mind and should avoid making personal criticisms of other Councillors or Council staff. Councillors and Council staff should also make it clear where their views differ from those of the Council.
6. Councillors and Council staff are encouraged to co-operate with media outlets and requests for interviews/photographs providing they are made in the interest of presenting a balanced story. Councillors and Council staff should respond to media enquiries within 24 hours of the enquiry being made. Councillors and Council staff should not feel pressured to make a comment if the enquiry has been made with an unreasonable time frame being set by the media organisation.
7. Councillors and Council staff should treat all media outlets equally and should avoid giving one outlet preferential treatment. Media releases should be distributed to all media outlets at the same time (unless they have been prepared for a specific publication).
8. Councillors and Council staff are encouraged to balance proactive and reactive comments in their use of the media.

**Media Releases**

Media releases should be used to:

- Promote specific Council projects and initiatives
- Assist with the relay of accurate and up-to-date information to shire residents and visitors to the area
- Congratulate/commend individuals and organisations
- Defend Council from unwarranted criticism.

Council media releases should be for the benefit or information of the community and not the aggrandisement of any individual.

All media releases are to be issued by Council’s Communications Coordinator. Employees are required to write their own media releases before sending them to the Communications Coordinator for editing and formatting.

Edits to quotations are to be cleared by the person quoted before sending to the media list. Approvals or further changes of edited media releases are to be actioned within 24 hours of receiving the amended document.

Elected representatives are free to issue their own media releases as individuals but should do so with the best interests of the organisation in mind and should avoid making personal attacks on other Councillors and Council staff.

Media releases issued on behalf of Council as an elected group should be approved by the Mayor or (in his/her absence) the Deputy Mayor. A draft copy should also be forwarded to any Councillor quoted within. Media releases issued by Council staff should be approved by a Manager and/or Director in consultation with the Communications Coordinator. Media releases deemed controversial in nature should also be approved by the General Manager.

All media releases should quote either a Councillor or member of staff as opposed to an “anonymous” Council spokesperson.

Media releases can be developed and released in conjunction with other groups/agencies but should be approved by a representative of both agencies (in Bega Valley Shire Council’s case the General Manager).

**Media Procedures**

**Media Releases**

All ideas for Bega Valley Shire Council media releases should be referred to the Communications Coordinator for consideration.

Council employees are required to prepare their own media releases but they need to be forwarded to Council’s Communications Coordinator for editing and formatting to ensure they maintain the same style and tone.

Staff should use Council’s Media Release template and follow the style guide below:

- Headline should be max 28pt Calibri Bold, centre aligned
- The date that the media release is being issued should be in 11pt Calibri Bold
• Text should be 11pt Calibri with text formatting set to ‘Normal’. ‘No spacing’ should be selected if material spills slightly onto a second page.

• The photograph caption (if needed) should be added at the bottom of the media release. The photograph itself should not be included in the document; this should be included as a full size attachment to the email.

• The word ‘End’ should be used in centre aligned 11pt Calibri Bold at the bottom of the media release.

• All web links to Council’s website should be presented as our homepage link (www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au) with additional instructions on how to navigate your way to the destination page.

Some suggested hints for writing media releases include:

• In most cases restrict a media release to one page.

• Avoid using dot points. Convey it in conversation instead.

• Use no more than two sentences per paragraph. One sentence is best.

• Each paragraph should be no more than four lines. Two is best.

• Quotations should form the bulk of the document. Replace descriptive sentences with a quote.

• Refer to BVSC Style Guide for use of language. As a guide, keep it human, professional and brief.

A Bega Valley Shire Council media release should never be issued without the Communications Coordinator’s knowledge.

All media releases should quote someone, whether it be a Councillor or member of staff, as opposed to an “anonymous” Council spokesperson. The exception to this rule would be where a statement is needed for immediate release. If there is no time to have a member of staff or Councillor sign-off on a quote, then a simple statement without quotation is warranted.

Those people quoted in a Bega Valley Shire Council media release should always be available for follow-up newspaper/radio or television interviews. A media release shouldn’t necessarily be seen as the final say on an issue.

Under no circumstances should a media release be issued quoting a Councillor or member of staff without that person’s prior knowledge.

Media releases should always be approved by a Manager or Director. Media releases deemed by the Communications Coordinator to be controversial in nature should also be approved by the General Manager. Media releases prepared for the Council (as an elected group) should be approved by the Mayor and in his/her absence, the Deputy Mayor.

Media releases can be developed and released in conjunction with other groups/agencies but should be approved by a representative of both agencies (in Bega Valley Shire Council’s case the General Manager). Joint media releases should always carry Council’s logo and a Council contact.

It is rare for a media release to be used immediately.

Staff should allow ample lead-up time for a media release to be used – particularly if it is promoting a specific event such as a public meeting. Time/Date sensitive media releases should be issued to the Communications Coordinator no less than two weeks prior to the date mentioned in the release.

All Council media releases should be sent by email to the Eden Magnet, the Merimbula News Weekly, the Bega District News, 2EC/Power FM, South East ABC, the Narooma News, WIN, Southern Cross, Channel 7 and local
elected representatives. Media releases should also be placed on Council’s website within 3 hours of issue, under ‘Media Releases’ and saved in Trim. Media releases should also be uploaded on Council’s Facebook page within two hours of issue to the website.

In addition to local media outlets, releases should be sent to Councillors and all (Council) recipients. They should also be displayed on Council noticeboards with information on who to refer inquiries to.

Certain projects/initiatives and issues will be of interest to a much wider audience. Where appropriate, staff are encouraged to forward Bega Valley Shire Council media releases to metropolitan media outlets and specialty publications.

Bega Valley Shire Council media releases will not always be used by the media. Staff should also look at the option of paid advertisements and the Community Link to get particularly important messages across.

Media outlets have full editorial control as to publishing our press releases. We have no say in the process once it has been sent. For this reason, Councillors and Council staff should refrain from criticising media outlets for deciding not to use a Council media release in a manner expected.

Keep all media releases newsworthy.

Social Media

Council uses social media as another method of distributing information and collecting community feedback. In terms of a news resource it is fast becoming the chosen method of participation for many community members. This presents obvious opportunities through the sharing of news via personal networks, but also presents Council with a number of challenges:

It increases the likelihood of every operational outcome being open to community comment and scrutiny. This is actually a positive outcome, but it means we will inevitably face greater criticism as more people become involved in a wider range of Council activities and services. We therefore need to be prepared with timely, accessible and accurate information, and put great attention to detail in our responses.

It democratises the distribution of information. Again, this can be seen as a positive when our information is widely shared on personal networks, but we must consider the effects of misinformed public comment also spreading through the social media sphere. This should be managed through close monitoring of key social media sites/pages, and the timely release of information that is easily understood by the community.

More resources are required to manage social media pages as they grow in popularity. This is problematic as our aim is to make our social media sites a popular destination for receiving and sharing news of Council business. To reduce strains on staff resources, Council’s Facebook page is to therefore be managed in two parts:

1. The planning of campaigns, strategy, uploading and maintenance is to be managed by the Communications team.
2. The responding to questions and enquiries is to be managed by Customer Services who will register enquiries through the CRM system.

For more detail on social media usage, please refer to the Social Media Communications Policy and Procedure.

Photographs

Bega Valley Shire Council provides a photograph with most of its media releases. These are a good way of giving Council a human face. Wherever possible, photographs should contain at least one person and an elected Councillor where appropriate.

As a courtesy, always ask permission of people featured in a photograph to be sent with a media release or uploaded onto the web or social media sites. The law requires us to seek parental/guardian permission if using a
photo of children for our media releases. We are also legally bound to seek permission when using a photo or video shot when the subject is in a private place.

Avoid the use of stock imagery for media release photos. Always attribute the photographer if an image has been provided and approved by a person external to Council.

When providing a photo to newspapers it is important to name everyone in that photo in order from left to right. It is rare for a photo to be published without the full names of those people pictured.

Media Enquiries

All media enquiries to Council staff should be directed to Council’s Communications Coordinator who will then contact the relevant Manager, Director or the General Manager.

Council staff contacted directly by the media are encouraged to promote specific projects/initiatives with which they are involved but should first obtain the approval of their Manager or Director, and if necessary, the Communications Coordinator.

Field staff approached by media representatives for information about the job/project they are working on should refer those enquiries to the Works Manager, and if necessary, the Communications Coordinator.

In their line of work, Council employees should not provide comment or information to the media with the intention of contesting or undermining Council policy or casting Council, Councillors or Council staff in a negative light.

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.

A media release or lines should always be considered as an option when responding to a media enquiry, particularly when the issue is of shire-wide interest and/or if suspected that the story will contain editorial influence.

Media outlets work to strict deadlines and a quick response to an enquiry can often make the difference between a positive or negative story. Councillors and Council staff are encouraged to respond to all media enquiries within 24 hours of the initial enquiry.

Councillors and Council staff should avoid using ‘no comment’ as a response to media inquiries. A delayed and well thought out response presented as written lines is better than no response at all.

Responding To Criticism

Criticisms about media content should be forwarded to Council’s Communications Coordinator. Formal complaints (on behalf of Council staff) should only be made by a Director or the General Manager.

Councillors and key Council staff should consider writing letters to the Editor in response to criticism made in the letters page based on inaccuracies, assumptions or unfair comments. Council employees other than the Communications Coordinator Directors and General Manager are not encouraged to respond to Letters to the Editor (with another Letter to the Editor) except in extraordinary circumstances. Letters should be signed by the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, General Manager or Director.

Councillors and Council staff should consider using a media release to respond to unwarranted criticism appearing in the news pages.

Interviews

Councillors and Council staff are encouraged to co-operate with media requests for interviews, particularly when there has been a Council media release issued on the interview subject.
Where appropriate an elected Councillor should always be given the opportunity to comment in relation to Council projects and initiatives. Preference should be given to the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor or chairperson of the relevant committee (i.e. General Purposes, Finance and Works, Planning and Environment, Community Services).

Councillors and Council staff should avoid providing information ‘off the record’ during media interviews.

**Media Monitoring**

Council’s Communications Coordinator maintains a file of ‘uncut’ papers and releases weekly and monthly media summaries, including levels of positive and negative reporting.

Those people who are interviewed on radio and who would like to hear a copy of the interview are asked to contact the radio station in person. People who would like to purchase a taped copy of someone else’s interview should contact the Communications Coordinator.

**Monitoring Media Behaviour**

The Communications Coordinator should be advised of any journalism that breaches the industry’s Code of Ethics (CoE), where appropriate action can then be taken if warranted.

Unacceptable breaches of the (CoE) include, but are not restricted to:

- Inaccurate reporting
- Use of editorial opinion outside of opinion columns
- Use of Council staff names in news stories and letters to the Editor.


If a media outlet is found to have breached the code, Council employees inform the Communications Coordinator who will take the appropriate action. This may involve making complaints direct to the media outlet, direct to the outlet’s corporate body, to the Australian Press Council or to the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

**Communications Coordinator’s Role**

The Communications Coordinator’s primary role is to establish strategic directions through a Communications Strategy for the maintenance and improvement of dialogue between Council and the community. A key part of this is formatting and releasing statements to the media for effective dissemination among the community without loss of the original message.

The Communications Coordinator will provide elected representatives and managers with a weekly and monthly review of Council’s press coverage and its impact on Council’s overall image (i.e. positive/negative/neutral).

**Informing the Communications Coordinator**

Council staff are obliged to keep the Communications Coordinator advised of any events/activities or issues that are likely to attract media and community interest. This importantly includes notification of operational matters that need to be relayed to the community. It is vital that the Communications Coordinator be informed early of any Council action that is expected to impact the community. The Communications Coordinator’s role is then to pass this information on to the community. If in doubt as to an action or issue’s importance, please contact the Communications Coordinator as soon as possible.
When the Communications Coordinator is absent

Council’s Community Relations and Leisure (CRL) Administration Coordinator is to act as a media contact when the Communications Coordinator is absent. Responsibilities will include acting as a point of contact for media outlets, distributing pre-approved media releases, and responding to in-house media-related enquiries.

The Administration Coordinator will not be responsible for drafting/redrafting media releases or providing updates to our social media pages. Urgent press releases needing drafting and releasing should be kept to brief statements and approved by the relevant Director and the Manager for Community Engagement and Information before sending out. Social media updates will be fulfilled by the Communications team.

Whenever possible, the Communications Coordinator should plan future absences with the Community and Relationships Administration Coordinator to ensure continuity.

Training

All new employees are to be given a rundown of Council’s media policy as part of the induction process.

Council’s Communications Coordinator is to coordinate media training workshops – in conjunction with the training officer – for those employees who identify it as a need.

Recycling

Councillors and Council staff are encouraged to recycle old newspapers using the appropriate recycling bins.