

# **Bass Coast Shire Council Media Engagement Policy 2020**

## **Purpose**

The Bass Coast Shire Council Media Engagement Policy 2020 aims to ensure our communication with the media is consistent, well informed, timely, appropriate and newsworthy. This Policy establishes a framework for an effective working relationship with the media, including the identification of Council's authorised spokespersons.

## **Scope**

This Policy provides guidance to all employees and Councillors in their contact with news media outlets, journalists and use of social media platforms. Media includes broadcast, print and online outlets including social media and freelance journalists.

## **Policy statement**

Council is committed to connecting with the community using a wide range of traditional and contemporary mediums. Media is a key influencer of Council's reputation and key platform for communicating with our community. It is therefore important that Council has an established framework for interaction with the media. Council will embrace opportunities presented by the media and proactively pursue media opportunities to connect in a genuine way with both the community and a broader audience.

Media organisations and their representatives will be treated equally and without bias. All media enquiries coming into the organisation will be managed through Council's Communications and Engagement Team.

Council will actively engage with media to:

- Protect and enhance Council's reputation
- Promote the projects and services of Council
- Inform the community about projects, policies and activities
- Engage the community on key decisions Council might be making
- Promote the Local Government area to visitors
- Provide essential updates to the community during a crisis or emergency

This Policy does not seek to limit the ability of Councillors to seek the view of their communities via social media and media channels.

It is not the intent of this Policy to curtail any individual human right to freedom of expression, but to acknowledge that all human rights come with responsibilities that must be exercised in a way that respects the human rights of others (*Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*) and that Councillors and staff must comply with legal obligations in the *Local Government Act 1989* and the Councillor and staff Codes of Conduct.

### **Staff authority and delegation**

The Mayor is the official spokesperson for Council on Council matters and decisions. If the Mayor is unavailable, the Deputy Mayor becomes Council's spokesperson. The Mayor has the discretion to delegate to other Councillors. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is the official spokesperson on operational matters. The CEO may delegate other Council staff to speak where appropriate.

Staff, as private citizens, are entitled to enter into public debate and make comment on civic affairs provided they make it clear that they are not speaking in their official position or on behalf of Council. Staff must also ensure that any comments to the media are not in breach of the Code of Conduct.

### **Councillors**

Councillors engage with the community through various forums including media. Councillors have the responsibility to ensure that their interaction with media (including on social media) is appropriate and compliant with this Policy. This includes:

- Making it clear they are expressing their personal opinion and not purporting to represent the position of Council or a committee of Council
- Not contradicting official Council decisions and/or organisational policies via a personal opinion to the media
- If a decision is still under consideration, all requests for comment must be referred to Council's Communications and Engagement Team
- Supporting Council's official release of information and not releasing information independently
- Ensuring the content of the subject matter of the media or social media interaction can not reasonably be interpreted as causing a detriment or undermining of Council
- Not disclosing information classified as confidential to the public or media including confidential information provided during briefings, workshops and/or meetings
- Refraining from using the media to make negative personal reflections on each other, or Council staff, or Council.

### **Reputation and risk**

Council will openly discuss matters of interest with media unless disclosure of information contravenes Council's obligations of confidentiality or privacy, duty of care, or could infringe on other laws or regulations that govern its operations.

To ensure consistency of communication with media, key messages will be developed and used. Council acknowledges that not all media coverage will reflect positively on the organisation;

however, it will seek to ensure that any media coverage of matters is balanced. While it is not always appropriate or timely for Council to make comment on specific issues, Council will endeavour to provide a response to all media enquiries.

Council officers delegated to speak to the media and the process for escalation of issues will be identified in communications plans. Wherever possible, media enquiries will be addressed by the staff member with the appropriate delegation and responsibility for the matter, with escalation occurring when the matter becomes controversial, sensitive or crosses departments within Council. In addition, the CEO will be the spokesperson for the organisation in crisis situations, projects of a significant nature or where an individual communications plan identified the CEO as the spokesperson.

Council will collect, retain and dispose of media communication in line with the *Public Records Act 1973* and Public Records Office of Victoria's retention and disposal schedules.

### **Proactive engagement and transparency**

The Communications and Engagement Team will, wherever possible, proactively release information to media and make the Mayor, CEO or their approved delegate available for comment or interview in a timely manner.

It is the responsibility of all staff to identify media opportunities. The Communications and Engagement Team will foster productive relationships with the media, being respectful of media needs including deadlines. Conversely, gaining media understanding for the environment which Council operates in, and which may limit Council's ability to fully respond to all matters.

Councillors and employees should not proactively engage with the media on issues relating to Council without support from the Mayor and/or CEO and the Communications and Engagement Team.

### **Responding to media enquiries/requests**

All media enquiries/requests will be referred to and managed by the Communications and Engagement Team, with the exception of comment at Council Meetings.

Media enquiries will be logged by the Communications and Engagement Team and sent to the responsible Manager/s and/or officers to provide information for a response. This ensures accurate information from the appropriate spokesperson is provided to the media.

After input from internal departments and Councillors (if required), the final response will be approved by the responsible General Manager and/or CEO.

For media requests (face-to-face or telephone interviews), the appropriate spokesperson will be briefed by the Communications and Engagement Team.

### **Council Meeting agendas**

Media releases will be developed for matters of interest arising from Council Meetings and will be released following the Meetings in consultation with the Mayor and relevant officers.

To ensure consistency and accuracy, only the Communications and Engagement Team will provide real time social media updates regarding notable resolutions at Council Meetings.

Councillors are encouraged to share this information at the conclusion of the Council Meeting. It is acknowledged that the minutes of Council meetings remain the official record of resolutions.

**Approval**

Adopted by Council at its meeting held on

Date 18 March 2020

Signed by the Mayor Brett Tessari

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brett Tessari', with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.