



**muswellbrook
shire council**

**Public Comment on Council
Matters Policy**

Policy No. P45/1

**Adopted By Council
12 July 2010**

**Minute No.
188**

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P45/1**

POLICY OBJECTIVES

Council recognises that a well run, competent, ethical and reputable organisation is the best way to promote a favourable image and that any public relations program is only as good as the organisation behind it. It also recognises that it can actively promote a favourable image through successful management of its communications processes with the media.

Therefore, the objectives of this policy are:

1. To ensure all communication from Council to the media is consistent, accurate, timely and appropriate;
2. To clearly identify Council's authorised spokespersons;
3. To maintain positive relations with the media by providing them with accurate timely information;
4. To improve communication with internal and external customers and enhance Council's public image;
5. To ensure that full and complete details of all non-confidential issues relevant to Council activities are fairly presented to the community.

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POLICY STATEMENT

1. APPLICATION

This policy applies to all Council officials.

2. TERMS

“Council official” includes councillors, members of staff of council and delegates of council. Council has extended the policy to include council’s contractors, consultants, volunteers, members and community representatives of advisory and section 355 committees.

“Public comment” includes public speaking engagements (including comments on radio and television), expressing views in letters to the press or in books or notices or where it is reasonably foreseeable that publication or circulation will enter the public domain.

3. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Muswellbrook Shire Council will take advantage of interest from the media to further its reputation. In dealing with the media, Council officials must be careful to protect the best interests of the Council.

Council welcomes inquiries from the media. All media persons are to be treated in the same manner as any other customer of Council. That is, we will attend to media requests with promptness and courtesy, honesty and respect. Council believes that a good relationship based on trust and confidence is important between Council and the news media.

Accordingly, Council will endeavour to:

- (a) Be a reliable source of information;
- (b) Never provide false information;
- (c) Be as co-operative as possible;
- (d) Be available;
- (e) Check second hand sources of “facts” or opinions for accuracy before repeating;
- (f) Provide up to date information;
- (g) Always give a direct and honest answer;
- (h) Respond promptly.

4. INQUIRIES FROM THE MEDIA

- (a) Most journalists call the Mayor’s office or the General Manager’s office when they need information about the Council or wish to arrange an interview. The Mayor or General Manager are to be available to receive requests and provide appropriate background and follow up to the media. Many times, the Mayor or the General Manager are able to handle inquiries directly. Occasionally, some questions require input from other Council officers.

- (b) Journalists may on occasions contact a senior officer directly. No staff member, other than those authorised and listed in Section 5, has approval to handle an enquiry from the media.
- (c) When contacted directly by the media, authorised officers may only handle the enquiry directly where the request is for simple, factual information. If the media request is for a comment on Council policy or official opinion, the enquiry must be directed to the General Manager.
- (d) The Mayor or General Manager are to handle all enquiries made by television or radio media.

When information is supplied verbally to the media, the questions asked and answers given should be kept or forwarded to the General Manager. This affords some protection against misreporting.

5. AUTHORISED SPOKESPERSONS

- (a) Council has nominated the following persons to act as official spokespersons to the media:
 - (i) Mayor
 - (ii) General Manager
- (b) The following authorised officers may handle a media enquiry where the request is for simple, factual information:
 - (i) Director Environmental Services
 - (iii) Director Community Infrastructure
 - (iv) Director Corporate and Community Services
- (c) No other council official is authorised to handle an enquiry from the media on Council's behalf unless directed by one of the above to provide simple, factual information.

6. ROLE OF COUNCILLORS

- (a) It is commonplace for Councillors to be asked by the media to comment on Council policy or decisions. Subject to the following clauses, only the Mayor and the General Manager are permitted to speak on behalf of Council.
- (b) Committee Chairpersons are authorised to prepare and submit draft press releases on issues relevant to their committee to the General Manager for review and distribution to the media.
- (c) Where appropriate, Committee Chairpersons may participate in radio interviews on issues relevant to their Committee.
- (d) As elected community representatives, Councillors may express their personal view only on any matter to the media, providing it is clearly understood that the views expressed are not necessarily the views of Council.

- (e) Councillors should take extreme care to refrain from expressing a personal view on any matter that may contravene Council's duty of care or could infringe laws or regulations, which govern Council's operations.
- (f) Councillors should avoid making personal criticisms of other councillors and council staff.

7. WRITTEN MATERIAL FOR THE MEDIA

- (a) All media releases, media kits, feature stories and other materials written for the media, on behalf of Council are to be sent to the General Manager for editing, photographic support and policy proofing before issuing.
- (b) In the absence of the General Manager, authorised officers may approve media releases.
- (c) Where a media release is prepared by another organisation which relates to a Council project or in which Council is involved, the Council official involved will endeavour to ensure that a copy of the release is provided to the General Manager.

8. MEDIA ALERTS

Any council official who is aware of an occurrence that may be of interest to the media should immediately contact the General Manager.

9. 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.

10. NON COMPLIANCE WITH THIS POLICY

10.1 Councillors

An alleged breach of this policy by a Councillor may be reported to the Council by the Mayor.

10.2 Employees

An alleged breach of this policy by an employee may result in disciplinary action. Enquiries made into alleged breaches which might give rise to disciplinary action must occur in accordance with the relevant local government award and make provision for procedural fairness including the right of an employee to be represented by their union.

10.3 Other Council Officials

An alleged breach by other Council officials will be reported in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

11. PUBLIC SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

Council staff requested to undertake public speaking engagements require the permission of the General Manager.

12. GENERAL

As a member of the community council officials have a right to enter into public debate in their private capacity. However, council officials must take care not to give the impression that their comments are made on behalf of council. Council officials will need to clearly state that such public comment reflects personal opinion. Public comment or statements on council matters should only be made in accordance with council's policy.

13. REVIEW

This policy shall be reviewed every two years to ensure that it meets the needs of Council.

LEGISLATION

Local Government Act, Regulations and Council's Code of Conduct.

PROCEDURE

As set above

Author: Bill Spicer (Executive Officer)

Amended by: Scott McNamara (Graduate Executive Officer) 2011

Date April 2007

REVIEW HISTORY:

	<i>Current</i>	<i>Previous</i>	<i>Prior</i>	<i>Prior</i>
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