

Policy

COMMUNICATIONS

TEAM:	Communications
RESPONSIBILITY:	Communications Manager
ADOPTED:	15 December 2021
REVIEW:	Every three years or as required
CONSULTATION:	None required
RELATED DOCUMENTS:	Elected Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Act 2002, Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987, Privacy Act 1993.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to detail Ashburton District Council's ('Council') approach to communicating with community members and the media. Council utilise a range of communication tools to raise awareness on a range of matters in Ashburton District.

We prioritise open, honest and transparent communication. This Communications Policy is an important document that helps ensure we achieve this priority, and that we are consistent and accurate in the information we provide the community.

Policy objectives

- To improve awareness and understanding of Council activities, plans and strategies through proactive, timely and appropriate communications.
- To ensure there are strong two-way communication channels between Council and the community.
- To communicate in a way that reflects Council's vision, strategic direction and priorities.
- To maintain an effective and ongoing flow of information among Council officers, and between officers and Elected Members.
- To adhere to the principles of transparency, consistency, clarity, and accuracy in communication with the community and key stakeholders.
- To provide information in a cost-effective way that meets the needs of key audiences.

Definitions

Communications Team means the individuals who hold a position within the Communications Team, including the Communications Manager.

Council means Ashburton District Council.

Council business for the purposes of this policy, means any matter related to the operational, governance or management of Council. Note – the [Elected Members' Allowance and Reimbursement Policy](#) defines Council business in terms of attendance which differs from 'Council business' in respect of this policy.

Council officer(s) means all employees including, fixed-term contract, casual, work experience, contractors, consultants, and volunteers of Council.

Elected Member(s) means the individuals holding the office of a member of Ashburton District Council, and includes the Mayor.

Executive Team means the individuals who hold the position of Group Manager, Manager People & Capability, and the Chief Executive.

Managers means Council employees who hold a position of management at Council.

Scope

This policy applies to Elected Members and states the Council's general principles for responding to and managing media relations.

Policy Statement

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Council recognises that the key to building positive and lasting partnerships with the community requires effective two-way communication. To ensure Council is delivering services in-line with community needs and expectations, Council communicates through a variety of channels.
- 1.2 We accept the important role of the media to report on issues of interest and its right to scrutinise Council activities. We strive to maintain positive and respectful relationships with media outlets.
- 1.3 This policy is used to state the Council's general approach to communication including response timeframes, spokespeople, communication channels and making comments to the media. It contains guidance for Elected Members and Council officers on communication matters.

2 Commitment to respond

- 2.1 All enquiries from any member of the community will be acknowledged by Council once received, and responded to once the enquiry has been assessed and information obtained.
- 2.2 It is acknowledged that enquiries are received through multiple channels, including: phone, email, written correspondence and social media.
- 2.3 All enquiries will be investigated, with the exclusion of comments received on Facebook or Instagram posts¹. Officers will assess the urgency of requests on a case-by-case basis. Where possible, responses will be provided within the journalist's or community members'

¹ Council is not currently resourced to address social media comments. Comments are often negative therefore it is not advisable for officers to enter into a debate on social media.

timeframe.

- 2.4 All Council responses will be easy to understand, current, accurate, meet Council standards, and uphold the reputation of Council.
- 2.5 Target response times are provided in the table below. Where there are legislative and/or statutory processes in place that dictate response times, those timeframes will take precedence. At times it will not be possible to provide a response within the target timeframes. In these instances officers will inform the person requesting the information of a realistic timeframe.
- 2.6 Response timeframes for service requests (where attendance from an officer is required) are detailed in the Long-Term Plan. Service requests are excluded from this policy.

	Acknowledgement	Response
Media request	Within 1 business day	Within 2 business days
General correspondence or request	Within 2 business days	Within 5 business days
LGOIMA² request	Within 1 business day	Within 20 business days

3 Council correspondence

- 3.1 All correspondence in person, over the phone (text or call), using a Council email address or on Council letterhead will be of a professional standard.
- 3.2 All official correspondence from Elected Members will be on Council letterhead, with the exception of official correspondence from the Mayor, who has their own personalised letterhead.
- 3.3 Personal correspondence from individuals that is not on behalf of Council will not use Council letterhead.

4 Engaging with media

- 4.1 Media relations are a key part of Council's operations, an important source of information for our community, and a significant part of Council's role as a community leader and advocate within the region.
- 4.2 Should Council choose not to provide a response to media, or in the event that a response time cannot be met due to the complexity of the request, the journalist and/or media contact will be advised.
- 4.3 All planned media coverage related to Council business must be discussed with the Communications Team who will assist in planning an appropriate approach.
- 4.4 Any Elected Member may, in a private capacity, engage with the media on matters outside of Council business or activities. In these situations it must be made clear that they are speaking as private individuals and not as representatives of Council and no Council position titles, logos, or letterhead templates must be used. It is recommended that elected members advise the Communications Team of any media interactions so that a Council-wide

² Requests received under the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act (LGOIMA) 1987 are dealt with under Council's [LGOIMA Policy](#).

perspective can be obtained and the Mayor may be informed.

5 Spokespeople

5.1 All media comments by Council spokespeople, including Elected Members, should accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic as determined by Council in adopted documents, including the Long-term Plan, Annual Plan, the District Plan, Council strategies, bylaws, policies and plans, and Council decisions minuted from Council meetings.

5.2 The roles and responsibilities of officers and Elected Members are as follows:

Authorised officer	Roles and responsibilities
Mayor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official spokesperson on all decisions of Council and governance matters. Responsible for allocating public speaking roles at Council events requiring elected member participation.
Deputy Mayor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acts as the Mayor's delegated spokesperson if the Mayor is not available.
Elected Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able to speak to the media in their capacity as individual Elected Members. May be delegated by the Mayor on matters relevant to a specific area of portfolio.
Chief Executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary spokesperson on operational or management matters. May respond to direct media inquiries. May answer letters to the editor or respond to criticism in the media of Council. Can appoint a nominee to undertake any of the above
Executive Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official spokesperson as delegated by the Chief Executive. May respond to direct media inquiries. Must advise the Communications Team of any interaction with the media.
Managers (excluding managers of public facilities) and Council officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not permitted to be interviewed or provide responses to the media. Limited to the research of operational or technical matter, to provide information for the drafting of a proposed media inquiry response. Must forward inquiries to appropriate Executive Team member or Communications Manager. Must forward all media requests to the Communications Team.
Managers of public facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can directly communicate with the media on marketing and promotional matters.
Communications Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides liaison support between media inquiries and Council officers, the Executive Team and Elected Members. Is not a quoted spokesperson. Makes suggestions to the Chief Executive on spokespeople.
Communications Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible for coordinating responses and providing information to the media on behalf of Council.

6 Engaging with stakeholders

6.1 We will work with a range of stakeholders as often as possible for mutual benefit. Engagement methods include regular meetings, workshops, presentations, and direct communications as needed.

- 6.2 Engagement with stakeholders is carried out as per the Council's [Community Engagement Policy](#).

7 How we communicate

- 7.1 A variety of communication tools are utilised to provide the media and the community with timely information and maintain strong two-way communication between Council and people in the Ashburton District where possible.
- 7.2 While a number of channels including traditional, online and social media will be used to ensure information reaches people from all parts of the community, the dissemination of information by digital communication channels is the preferred method.
- 7.3 **Media releases**
- 7.3.1 Media releases are a vehicle to communicate critical or substantial Council decisions or announcements.
- 7.3.2 Media releases are distributed to local and regional media outlets (where appropriate) and posted on the Council's website.
- 7.3.3 Joint media releases involving external third parties are discouraged and may only be issued with the approval of the Executive Team and/or Communications Manager.
- 7.4 **News stories**
- 7.4.1 New stories are informational content posted only to social media and Council's website.
- 7.5 **Digital communications (including SMS, social media and websites)**
- 7.5.1 Council recognises digital communication is an effective way to engage with the community. Council creates specific content that meets and exceeds the expectations of a target audience in a specific digital platform, and is in line with the Council's strategic objectives.
- 7.5.2 Council's website ashburtondc.govt.nz is the primary digital communication tool. Other digital tools such as SMS and social media will be used as required.
- 7.5.3 Other subsidiary websites may be established to communicate subject specific information.
- 7.5.4 Whilst hosting a range of content specific to the services, events and programmes offered by Council, websites also provide an avenue to distribute information to the community and media.
- 7.5.5 Elected Members are not permitted to post on Council's digital communications channel or post comments under Council posts, and Council will not tag individual Elected Members in posts. Elected Members are encouraged to share Council's content on their personal accounts.
- 7.5.6 Council officers are not responsible for posting any content on Elected Members' social media sites, and are also not responsible for monitoring these sites or responding to any requests received. It is up to the individual Elected Member to manage the content on their own social media sites.
- 7.6 **Live streaming of meetings**
- 7.6.1 Council meetings held in the Council Chamber will be live streamed at Council's discretion via the Council website and social media channels. This will include hearings of Council.
- 7.6.2 Confidential Council meetings will not be recorded or live streamed.
- 7.6.3 Other public meetings held in the Council Chamber may be streamed live, as authorised by the Chief Executive, or a nominated representative.

- 7.6.4 The Chair and/or Chief Executive have the discretion and authority at any time to direct the termination or interruption of live streaming if they believe it is advisable to do so. Such direction will only be given in exceptional circumstances, where the content of debate is considered misleading, defamatory or potentially inappropriate to be published.
- 7.6.5 As per the Ashburton District Council Code of Conduct, Elected Members should act respectfully and objectively to uphold the democratic process. In this regard, Elected Members are not permitted to engage in online dialogue during the course of the meetings being live streamed.
- 7.6.6 During the course of the meeting, Elected Members are not permitted to discuss matters raised in posts on social media which occur as the meeting is being live streamed. This is to ensure objectivity is maintained during discussion and that no advantage is provided to those who engage in feedback online. The Chair holds discretion to dismiss any comments of this nature raised by Elected Members if they arise.
- 7.6.7 There may be situations where, due to technical difficulties a live stream may not be available. Whilst every effort will be made to ensure the live streaming and website are up and running smoothly, Council takes no responsibility for and cannot be held liable for, the live streaming or Council website being temporarily unavailable due to technical issues beyond its control.

7.7 Publications

- 7.7.1 The Communications Team prepare and issue information to residents, via editorial and advertising means on a regular basis.
- 7.7.2 Generalised publications for elected members through the Communications Team is the preferred option for communication. Content that is unrelated to Council matters, overly religious, political or offensive may not be published.

7.8 Advertising

- 7.8.1 Council will undertake advertising to communicate information and promote events, activities and services to both the local community and beyond.
- 7.8.2 Advertising is recognised as a key tool for marketing purposes.
- 7.8.3 Advertising will be placed within the channel most appropriate to reach the target audience with the relevant content and includes (but is not limited to):
- Print media: local and/or regional
 - Publications: local magazines, specialist industry specific publications
 - Broadcast media: television and/or radio
 - Online: Google, social media, relevant websites and other platforms
 - Digital: AV screens in various locations
 - Outdoor advertising: billboards etc.

8 Breaches

- 8.1 Elected member breaches of this Policy will be dealt with in accordance with the Elected Members Code of Conduct.