

# Councillor Communications Policy

## Policy statement

The City of Whittlesea aims to ensure the delivery of clear, timely, transparent, responsive and accurate information in public forums and communication channels.

The Mayor and Councillors play an important role in supporting Council's communication to our community about our key priorities, programs, services and initiatives.

This policy ensures roles are clear and councillors and Council staff are empowered to deliver excellent external communication to the City of Whittlesea community in line with their roles, responsibilities and obligations.

## Purpose

The Councillor Communications Policy:

- a) provides a framework for the Mayor and Councillors to effectively use external communications to support the delivery of clear, timely, transparent, responsive and accurate information to the community
- b) outlines appropriate communication activities for the Mayor and Councillors aligned to the Councillor Code of Conduct
- c) facilitates adherence to the Councillor Code of Conduct, in particular the standards of conduct required of a Councillor
- d) outlines the role outlines the role of the CEO, Executive, the Public Affairs Department and other Council staff.

During a Federal, State or Council election period this policy must be read in conjunction with the City of Whittlesea Election Period Policy.

## Scope

This policy applies to all Councillors of the City of Whittlesea and relevant Council staff and contractors.

## Alignment to Whittlesea 2040

This policy primarily guides Council's work toward the following Goal as outlined in *Whittlesea 2040: A place for all: **High Performing Organisation & Connected Community***

## Overarching Governance Principles

The development of this policy reflects consideration of the *Local Government Act 2020 (Act)* Overarching Governance Principles, and, in particular, the following:

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Lawful	<input type="checkbox"/>
Best community outcome	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sustainable	<input type="checkbox"/>

Community engagement	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Innovation & improvement	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collaboration with government bodies	<input type="checkbox"/>

Financially viable	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consistent with government plans	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Transparent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

### Gender Equality, Climate Change, Human Rights and Child Safe Compliance

All City of Whittlesea policies comply with the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities*, *Gender Equality Act*, *Climate Change Act* and the *Child Safe Standards*.

#### Definitions

In this policy, unless the context or subject-matter indicates otherwise:

<b>Act</b>	means the <i>Local Government Act 2020</i> .
<b>Chief Executive Officer (CEO)</b>	means the person appointed by Council to be its Chief Executive Officer, or any person acting in that position.
<b>Confidential Information</b>	has the same meaning as in section 3(1) of the Act.
<b>Council</b>	means Whittlesea City Council.
<b>Councillors</b>	means the individuals holding the office of a member of Council or an appointed Administrator.
<b>Councillor Code of Conduct</b>	means the Councillor Code of Conduct developed by Council under s139 of the Act.
<b>Council officer</b>	means the Chief Executive Officer and staff of Council appointed by the Chief Executive Officer.
<b>Mayor</b>	means the Councillor elected to the office of Mayor of Council, the Deputy Mayor if the Mayor is unavailable, any person appointed by Council to be Acting Mayor, or an appointed Chair of a Panel of Administrators.
<b>media</b>	includes but is not limited to print, electronic and broadcast news/information outlets.
<b>online and social media</b>	includes any digital space where people are able to share information, including but not limited to websites, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube and podcasts.
<b>Standards of Conduct</b>	means the Standard of Conduct outlined in Schedule 1 to the <i>Local Government (Governance and Integrity) Regulations 2020</i> .

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## Principles

Council aims to ensure the delivery of clear, timely, transparent, responsive and accurate information in public forums and communication channels.

Council will strive to communicate openly and honestly and to maximise public knowledge of our activities.

Communication is delivered in an accessible and inclusive format with consideration given to the City of Whittlesea's diverse community.

External communication is based on a considered strategy with a clear understanding of audience, desired outcome, appropriate channels, impacts on community, government relationships, reputation management and legal liability.

Council's external communication channels will be used to:

- a) inform the community of key Council decisions, services, programs, events and initiatives; and
- b) build civic pride; and
- c) promote transparency and accountability of Council's decision-making processes; and
- d) promote opportunities for community participation and engagement.

Council's external communication channels will not be used to promote individual Councillors.

In accordance with the Act, individual Councillors must not direct any Council officer in relation to communications activities.

Council's external communication channels will not favour any particular candidate or Councillor, political party or faction. Channels may be used to acknowledge funding contributions, advocacy outcomes or election commitments.

All external communications will be consistent with any adopted or established Council position. Where there is not a Council position, a Councillor must not portray that they are commenting on behalf of Council.

## Media Relations

Council acknowledges the important role of the media to report on issues of interest to the community, including Council activities. Council will strive to maintain positive and respectful relationships with media outlets.

The Public Affairs Department is responsible for proactive and reactive media management. It will issue media releases, manage responses to media enquiries and be responsible for liaising with journalists.

Councillors should refer journalists to the Public Affairs Department to seek an official Council response to ensure messaging to community is consistent.

Councillors should take all reasonable steps to ensure any public comment they provide as an individual is portrayed as their own and not as a representative of Council. Councillors should inform journalists *"These are my individual comments and opinions and not those of Council"* (or similar).

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All media responses on behalf of the Council will be prepared by the Public Affairs Department in collaboration with the relevant officers and approved by the relevant spokesperson.

Responses are to be in the best interests of Council and not for the personal advantage of any individual Councillor, ward or political party.

The Public Affairs Department is responsible for establishing and maintaining Council's media profile.

Regular summaries of media coverage will be provided to Councillors, including transcripts and videos as appropriate.

Council will offer all Councillors media training, which will be included in the Councillor Training Plan.

### **Public comment and spokespeople**

The Mayor (or a Councillor authorised by the Mayor) and/or Chief Executive Officer (or a Council officer authorised by the Chief Executive Officer) are the official spokespersons of Council.

The Mayor is the official spokesperson on decisions of Council. The Mayor may authorise to the Deputy Mayor/s or another relevant Councillor to act as Council's official spokesperson, as appropriate.

The CEO is the official spokesperson for Council operations, including staffing, organisation structure and issues relating to day-to-day service provision. The CEO is the official spokesperson for officer recommendations on matters prior to their endorsement at a Council Meeting. The CEO may authorise one of the Directors or Executive Managers (or in some circumstances other relevant Council officers) to act as Council's official spokesperson on such issues, to ensure the most authoritative person on a particular issue provides public comment.

Individual Councillors wishing to initiate their own communication, through any channel including media, must make it clear that they are expressing their 'individual' view and not the 'official' view of Council. Councillors are responsible for ensuring that information they are commenting on or providing is accurate and consistent with legislation and policies.

Any public comment must not disclose confidential information.

Neither the Mayor nor Councillors must provide public comment on operational matters/staffing issues, relations between officers and Councillors, breaches of the Staff Code of Conduct or those matters set out in ss46-49 of the Act.

Nothing in this policy precludes the Mayor from publicly announcing the appointment or reappointment of the CEO and any process relating to such appointment or reappointment.

### **Media roles and responsibilities**

Role	Responsibilities as spokesperson
Mayor	Official spokesperson on all strategic matters and decisions of Council
Deputy Mayor	Acts as the Mayor's spokesperson if the Mayor is unavailable or the Mayor has authorised to be official spokesperson
Councillors	May speak publicly on behalf of Council if authorised by the Mayor

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	Councillors speaking in their capacity as individual Councillors must make it clear they are expressing their 'individual' view and not the 'official' view of Council.
CEO	Official spokesperson on high-level operational matters or Council officer recommendations prior to Council consideration of an Officer Report
Directors and Executive Managers	Official spokespersons on operational matters when authorised by the CEO.
Public Affairs Department	Responsible for Council's external and internal communication channels, including coordinating media responses and providing information to the media on behalf of Council
Other Council Staff	No media role unless requested to provide subject matter expertise to inform the formulation of a response to a media enquiry in line with the Staff Code of Conduct.

### Promoting Council business

The Public Affairs Department is responsible for developing, approving and implementing Council's external communications strategies.

Council's communications will be apolitical and not used to promote any individual Councillor or Council officer views on agendas that are inconsistent with or contrary to those of Council.

Council decisions should be respected by individual Councillors as a collective. Councillors must not misrepresent any Council decision.

State and Federal politicians will only be represented through Council's media and external communication strategies where necessary to reasonably inform the community of important news or as part of Council's advocacy program.

It is the responsibility of the Mayor and Councillors to ensure that the messages they communicate on external channels are clear and consistent, accurate and factual and do not seek to deliberately harm the reputation of the Council or defame individuals.

### Councillors as candidates

Council's media activities and external communications are not to be used for political advantage by Councillors who are candidates in a Local, State or Federal Government election.

Councillors must abide by Council's Election Period Policy.

### Photography and videography

All Councillors will have an official Councillor portrait photograph to be used during their Councillor term. All official Councillor portraits will be up-to-date and consistent in their aesthetic, to present a unified and modern look, in line with corporate branding. Official Councillor portraits will be taken by a Council photographer within the first month of a new Council being elected.

Councillors cannot supply their own image to be used as the official Councillor portrait.

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Official Councillor portraits remain the property of Council at the end of a Council term. These portraits must not be used in candidacy for State, Federal or Council elections.

High quality images/videography taken by or of Councillors (for example, at community events) may be passed to the Public Affairs Department for consideration for use in Council communications if Council's Photography and Videography Permission Form has been signed by people featured in the supplied photographs.

Council officers and contractors will only attend and take photographs/videography at official Council events, at the discretion of the Executive Manager Public Affairs. All photos taken will be required to have Council's Photography and Videography Permission Form signed.

The Public Affairs Department may supply Councillors with photographs/videography taken at official events, if deemed appropriate and appropriate authorisations have been obtained by people in the image/s.

Council-supplied photographs/videography must not be passed onto a third party for any purpose, without the written authorisation of the Executive Manager Public Affairs.

Copyright of images/videos remains with Council.

### **Speeches at events**

The Mayor and/or CEO (or delegate) are the official spokespersons of Council at events. Council resources will support the preparation of speeches for the official spokesperson/s or delegate only.

Speeches will include an Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.

### **Community newsletter**

Council produces and distributes a regular publication for all households and businesses, to provide proactive and direct information to the community about Council decisions, policies, initiatives, services and events.

It must not be used for political purposes, to promote individual agendas, or criticise Councillors, Council decisions, community members, members of the Government or Opposition, or Council officers.

### **Websites**

Council's websites are key digital communication tools that host a range of content specific to the services, events and programs offered by Council.

Councillors will each have a profile on Council's corporate website that features their contact information, a photograph, Council committee memberships and a short biography.

### **Newsletters**

Individual Councillor newsletters will not be produced or funded by the organisation and any unofficial newsletters produced by Councillors must not include the City of Whittlesea brand or logo.

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Councillors must ensure that the information in any of their own produced material complies with the requirements outlined in this policy and is consistent with the Councillor Code of Conduct.

## **Social Media**

Council will maintain a corporate social media presence. The posting of content and moderating posts on Council's official social media channels is the responsibility of the Public Affairs Department.

Council's corporate social media channels may include a dedicated Mayor's Facebook page or profile. The Public Affairs Department is responsible for the management and posting to this account and posts will require pre-approval by the Mayor.

Council's social media accounts will allow public comments during business hours but Council may choose to limit commenting at any time if it is deemed there is a high risk of defamatory, offensive or unreasonable content in a particular post.

The Public Affairs Department maintains the right to hide comments and block users that contravene social media guidelines as displayed on relevant channels.

Participants on Council's social media channels are also governed by Council's unreasonable complainant procedures.

Councillors may utilise online channels and social media networks to engage with the community. To provide clarity for the public between 'individual' views and the 'official' view of Council, the following disclaimer should be displayed on any channel where a Councillor represents themselves as a Councillor:

*"These are my individual comments and opinions and not those of Council" (or similar).*

Any online/social media channels used by a Councillor are not considered an official Council channel. Council's logo and branding must not be used on any social media sites established by a Councillor (VCAT has determined that where a Councillor uses a social media channel for a mixture of personal and Council purposes, the content may be regarded as having been published by a Councillor in their capacity as a Councillor, thereby engaging the Councillor Code of Conduct).

If a Councillor wishes to develop an individual social media account for the duration of their term the following naming convention should apply: Councillor [insert surname], [Ward Name], City of Whittlesea

Councillors are responsible for maintaining and monitoring their own individual social media accounts and accept all legal responsibilities for them.

Use of online and social media channels in the role of a Councillor should be consistent with the Councillor Code of Conduct and relevant legislation and policies.

## **Branding**

Any use of the City of Whittlesea logo must be in accordance with Council's Brand Guidelines.

## **Contravention of this policy**

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Contravention of this policy by Councillors will be addressed through the Councillor Code of Conduct.

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