



POLICY STATEMENT

Communication Policy

POLICY ADOPTED: 4 August 2015

Policy Objective:

The Bland Shire Council Communications Plan provides a framework for all communication between Council and its stakeholders and internally between staff and directorates. Council acknowledges that the effective dissemination of information and communication is a vital element in building a positive identity for Council through greater community awareness of its services, activities, achievements and resources.

The objectives of this policy are:

- Provide the community with information that is timely, clear, accurate and concise.
- Provide regular and consistent communication on Council's projects and activities
- Create a positive and professional image for Bland Shire Council through open communication.
- Increase Community awareness and understanding of Council's role and responsibilities in the community.
- Increase community interest and support in Council activities
- Foster a meaningful community consultation process.
- Respond to issues raised in the media in a timely and appropriate manner.
- Ensure staff are kept fully up to date and informed about Council matters.

Successful communication will be achieved through the widespread distribution of timely, regular, consistent and truthful information in partnership with productive community consultation on key issues. All directorates of Council must be committed to the plan.

It is crucial that Council sends a strong, accurate and consistent message to the community in all of its communications. This policy is designed to facilitate that process.

Policy Statement:

1. Council's Stakeholders

When developing communication strategies and key messages, it is imperative the communiqué is targeted to the correct stakeholders. The characteristics of each stakeholder must be considered including their needs, wants, attitudes and perceptions of Council in addition to how they receive their information

Bland Shire Council's communication stakeholders include:

- Ratepayers and residents
- Potential residents of Bland Shire
- Bland Shire Councillors
- Employees of Bland Shire
- Visitors to the Bland Shire
- Investors, developers and individuals with business interests within the Bland Shire

- Customers who seek products or services or information from Council
- Community and government organisations
- Local, regional and national media

2. Principles of Good Communications

This Communications Plan has been developed based upon the principles of good communication.

Visibility: To commence or maintain a strong two-way communication relationship with your stakeholders it is important that you are visible as much as possible. Visibility leads to recognition and acceptance plus it allows the community to see the breadth and value of your work.

Simplicity: The community is busy with many aspects of their lives whether at work or home. Communication must be simple and straight forward to ensure maximum readers.

Repetition: Wherever possible a repetitive schedule should be devised for message placement to ensure it receives community consideration. The more a message is repeated the wider its audience will become.

Value: Ensuring a message has a reasonable level of value for the recipient is paramount to gain their attention and interest. As simple rule of thumb here is that Council operating procedures hold little value to the community but how those procedures affect the community hold a high level of value. Therefore, messages should be structured with the community effect as their foundation.

Variety: To ensure a message is received by the community at large it needs to be placed in a number of different communication vehicles. The more vehicles (website, newspapers, media outlets, direct mail, social media, etc) it appears in the wider its likely coverage will be.

Listening: Good (and effective) communication requires two parties -the giver and the receiver. If you send a message you must also expect to receive some form of response at times. It is important that feedback on all issues is encouraged and processed. Nothing will dampen the community's interest quicker than the belief they are not being listened to.

Consistency: To build credibility and a positive reputation messages need to be consistent. If your messages are ALWAYS simple, hold value for the recipient, encourage feedback and are placed in a variety of different places they will generate interest and earn respect at an increasing level each time they are placed.

Evaluation: The only accurate way of knowing if your communication is effective is to evaluate it (and the best way to do that is to set a goal for each one and then evaluate if it has been achieved).

3. Benefits of Effective Communication

Effective communication creates a flow of information which leads to success for both the organisation and community. This success occurs as the effective communication:

- Builds trust
- Fosters a positive reputation
- Strengthens relationships with key stakeholders
- Assists Council to deal with negative press and a crisis from a position of strength
- Improves employee's morale and job satisfaction
- Helps attract and retain employees

4. Guidelines for Council staff and Councillors when dealing with the media

General matters

Comment on general Council matters is restricted to the Mayor, General Manager, relevant Director or Community Relations Officer. Permission may be given by the Mayor, General Manager or Director for other staff or councillors to make comment.

Contentious issues of a sensitive or controversial nature -

Any formal comment on behalf of Council is restricted to the Mayor and General Manager. If a journalist phones another Councillor or member of staff they are asked to politely refer the matter to the General Manager.

Do not reply "no comment" or "I am not allowed to talk to the media" as this implies Council has something to hide. In accordance with the objectives of this policy, restricting comment to the Mayor and General Manager helps ensure Council sends a strong and consistent message to the community and presents a unified front.

Letters to the editor

Staff and Councillors, with the exception of the Mayor and General Manager, are prohibited from submitting Letters to the Editor regarding Council related business in their capacity as a staff member or Councillor without the written permission of the General Manager. Council staff and Councillors may write Letters to the Editor as private individuals on the conditions that they are not identified as Councillors or Council employees and their comments are not perceived as representing official Council position or policy.

Photographs/film footage

Council staff are encouraged to participate in any photographs or filming to promote Council in a positive light with permission from their director. Other requests for photographs and filming are to be directed to the Community Relations Officer.

Media Releases

To ensure a consistent approach, all media releases shall be issued through the Community Relations Officer.

Communication Strategies

5. Corporate Identity

The image that the Bland Shire Council presents is vital. Our corporate identity, projected through all of our visual and print communications, signage and web presence is an important part of this image. Whenever we produce advertising, publicity or promotional material it should be of the highest quality and conform to corporate style. A comprehensive Corporate Style Guide has been adopted by Council outlining how all forms of Council correspondence must appear including all media (print, audio, online, digital, video, etc) in both internal and external communication.

The Bland Shire Council logo translates our identity into a visual language. It represents who we are and what we stand for and is the public demonstration of our brand. The identity must be used on everything produced by the organisation, both internal and external.

All requirements regarding corporate identity and corporate style can be found in Council's Corporate Style Guide which applies to all organisational directorates and activities.

6. Community Consultation

Community consultation is seen as a vital part of operations as the community expects that Council will listen to its views, priorities, needs and expectations and be provided with opportunities to express them through community consultation.

Community consultation enables a better understanding of issues and gives a sense of ownership in a project. For the community to truly feel involved with Council, it must be regularly given the opportunity to input their ideas into Council's activities. Council is committed to this process.

Effective community consultation is achieved by Council in the following ways:

- Community surveys
- Council's website
- Your Vision Our Future - Community Strategic Plan
- Public invitation to make submissions regarding important documents such as the Operational Plan, Delivery Plan, Long Term Financial Plan and resourcing strategies
- Public forum at Council meetings
- Community forums held in the Shire villages
- One to one consultation with the Mayor, Councillors and management
- Community meetings hosted by Council
- Social media

In order for the community consultation process to be considered effective, the public must feel as though they have the opportunity to air an opinion or make a submission and must have the assurance that this will be properly considered.

7. Council Website

The Bland Shire Council website (www.blandshire.nsw.gov.au) is a key aspect of Council's community consultation and communication strategies.

The website provides information about Council, its services and the area it represents in addition to the ability for site visitors to interact with Council online via the provision of online forms, the Your Say section which invites users to comment on any issue and online surveys which allows Council to poll the community on any topic at any time.

Members of the community are also given the opportunity to promote upcoming community events and programs through the community calendar of the website. However, all submissions for inclusion in the calendar are moderated by a Council website administrator before being published. Council prohibits use of the community calendar or any part of the website for commercial advertising.

The website also serves as Council's primary point of communication with the community during an emergency and can be used to broadcast up to the minute emergency information and details about road closures etc.

In accordance with this policy, Council must ensure it provides accurate information at all times. Information must be consistent with Council's relevant policies and procedures as well as relevant legislation in relation to corporate and local government communication and correspondence.

The website is to be maintained and updated on a weekly basis as a minimum. Documents to be available for downloading from the website should be in an Adobe Portable Document File (pdf) format to protect the integrity of the document.

Detailed statistics on Council's website are available through Google Analytics and should be reported to Council on a regular basis. Detailed usage statistics include daily statistics, most popular pages, entry and exit pages, referrers, and searches made by users.

The website www.blandshire.nsw.gov.au is Council's primary portal of online communication. Council's logo is protected by copyright and no part of the logo may be reproduced, modified, adapted or published in any way on any other website, social media site or online space without the written permission of the General Manager in accordance with Council's Corporate Style Guide.

Any requests or enquiries regarding reproduction and copyright should be addressed in writing to:

The General Manager
Bland Shire Council
PO Box 21
West Wyalong NSW 2671

8. Media Relations

Council will endeavour to establish and maintain a good working relationship with local and regional media outlets. It is necessary for Council to provide accurate, timely and cost effective information to media outlets that portrays an accurate message.

Media activities carried out by Council will be predominately undertaken by the Community Relations Officer including the distribution of media releases, organisation of photo opportunities, contacting the media with the intent of gaining new publicity about, or originated by Council, development of media kits and responding to media requests for information.

All Council staff initiated contact with the media must come through the Community Relations Officer or General Manager. In the General Managers absence, the Director of Corporate, Community and Development Services.

Council aims to distribute at least one media release per week. Media releases must be authorised by either the General Manager or Director of Corporate, Community and Development Services prior to distribution.

All media releases will be presented on Council's standard media release template. A media contacts database is maintained by the Community Relations Officer and all media releases are posted on Council's website within the 'news' section. The use of photographs, images, graphs and maps is encouraged to strengthen messages. The supply of images to the media can assist in the explanation of a difficult situation and greatly increase the likelihood of the media using the story.

9. Crisis Management

Advance preparation is critical when dealing with potential emergencies or controversies. To prevent the likelihood of controversies, management in consultation with employees need to identify in advance issues that may impact significantly on the community.

Such issues may be identified internally or through the monitoring of traditional media, social media and correspondence. Council must be proactive in communicating to the community the key facts of the issue in an accurate manner, ensuring that the issue does not become a crisis.

Appropriate communication methods may be the distribution of a media release, an interview with the media, communication via social media (in accordance with the Social Media policy), posting on Council's website or communication directly with the effected parties - depending on the situation.

All media and correspondence must be monitored to gauge public feeling and highlight any further issues.

Occasionally an unforeseen crisis occurs and the following steps may help management to deal with it effectively –

- Establish an issues management team (General Manager, Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Directors) and ensure they are well briefed on the issue. Appoint a media liaison person (Community Relations Officer).
- Seek legal advice if necessary
- Remind staff not to comment on the issue in accordance with section 4 of this policy *Guidelines for Council staff and Councillors when dealing with the media*
- Advise customer service to put all calls through to the Community Relations Officer.
- Establish the facts, obtain necessary background information, determine key messages and formulate a response.
- Appoint a single spokesperson (Mayor or General Manager, in accordance with section 4 of this policy *Guidelines for Council staff and Councillors when dealing with the media*
- Draft information for release to media.
- In the event the issue is of wide interest to state or national news outlets, arrange a press conference with the spokesperson.
- Ensure spokesperson is fully briefed on the issue.
- Communicate with staff
- Monitor media and social media coverage

In the event on an emergency, Council's website should be switched to emergency mode and used to update the community on breaking developments and emergency information. Content displayed on the website shall be facilitated through the Community Relations Officer or appointed media liaison person.

10. Customer Service

The way in which Council receives, answers and responds to phone calls, letters, faxes and emails combined with its face to face contact with customers, has the greatest impact on how Council is perceived in the community. It is vital that Council ensures that correct, effective, efficient and customer orientated responses are generated to develop and maintain a positive reputation for Council.

11. Staff communication (Internal)

Council's elected Councillors and employees are its most effective public relations ambassadors. It is vital that all employees and Councillors receive timely, relevant, consistent and user friendly information to ensure that they are adequately informed on Council's activities, minimising the likelihood of misinformation.

Effective internal communication is not a one-way process. It is a multi-way process that flows up, down and across the organisation, It also encourages a participatory approach to change management, increases employee morale and encourages more effective communication between employees across directorates and management levels.

Building and maintaining good relationships with staff is crucial to achieving effective communication.

Council utilises four main methods of communication with its staff: Face to face, Verbal, Electronic and Written. These are utilised in many ways, including but not limited to:

- New employee induction process ensuring a full understanding of the workings of Council
- Email distribution of the weekly *Facts Friday* newsletter
- Utilisation of all of staff e-mails to distribute key messages and keep staff informed. Staff and Councillors are issued with media releases at the same time as they are distributed to the media.
- Utilisation of all of staff intranet to distribute key messages and keep staff informed
- Staff memos and file notes

- Payslip messages
- Council staff meetings held every month on the morning following Council meetings.
- Regular directorate meetings
- Regular managers and supervisors meeting
- Staff achievement and long service awards
- Bland Shire Council Social Club

Additional forms of communication include:

Open Door Policy

An open door policy is encouraged throughout the organisation at all levels.

Increased Access and Visibility

In line with results obtained by staff surveys, there is a commitment to increased accessibility and visibility of the Senior Management Team

Noticeboards

Noticeboards provide fixed locations throughout the organisation where information can be posted. Posters etc are used to create further awareness and knowledge of issues or upcoming events

Internal Publications

Guiding Principles, Policies, Delegation Register, Leaflets, booklets and information packs are all used to support staff in their work and to keep them informed of organisational expectations.

Staff Presentations, Workshops and training days

These events are held to bring staff together from all directorates and areas to actively promote discussion and feedback on a specific topic.

Staff Surveys

Council is committed to surveying its staff every two years. Feedback from these surveys are provided to staff and actions are implemented into Council's planning and reported back to staff utilising internal communication methods.

12. Councillor and Staff communication

Part 6 of the *Model Code of Conduct 2013* (adopted 16th April 2013) clearly states the obligations of Councillors and staff in relation to communication. The following is an extract from the *Model Code of Conduct 2013* relating to inappropriate interactions.

Inappropriate interactions

6.7 You must not engage in any of the following inappropriate interactions:

- a) Councillors and administrators approaching staff and staff organisations to discuss individual or operational staff matters other than broader workforce policy issues.*
- b) Council staff approaching councillors and administrators to discuss individual or operational staff matters other than broader workforce policy issues.*
- c) Council staff refusing to give information that is available to other councillors to a particular councillor.*
- d) Councillors and administrators who have lodged a development application with council, discussing the matter with council staff in staff-only areas of the council.*
- e) Councillors and administrators being overbearing or threatening to council staff.*
- f) Councillors and administrators making personal attacks on council staff in a public forum.*

g) Councillors and administrators directing or pressuring council staff in the performance of their work, or recommendations they should make.

h) Council staff providing ad hoc advice to councillors and administrators without recording or documenting the interaction as they would if the advice was provided to a member of the community.

i) Council staff meeting with applicants or objectors alone AND outside office hours to discuss applications or proposals.

j) Councillors attending on-site inspection meetings with lawyers and/or consultants engaged by council associated with current or proposed legal proceedings unless permitted to do so by council's general manager or, in the case of the Mayor or administrator, exercising their power under section 226 of the Act.

13. Publications

Annual Report

Council's Annual Report is produced each year and made available to the public as required by the Local Government Act (1993). The Annual Report Summary is distributed to all households within the shire and non resident ratepayers located outside of the shire and these documents are placed on Council's website and are available on request from Council.

Community Newsletters

A community newsletter is produced periodically to inform the community about Council initiatives, events and activities as well as not for profit community events. The newsletter provides the opportunity to recap and reinforce key messages that may or may not have already appeared in the media. The newsletter is designed and produced by the Community Relations Officer and approved by the General Manager prior to printing and distribution.

Council Advertisements and Notices

Council advertisements and notices are placed in the West Wyalong Advocate at a predetermined discount rate and other publications when appropriate. The Council notices are of a factual nature in order to meet legislative requirements for items such as up and coming events, positions vacant, approved development applications and community input sought on specific projects.

Other publications are developed by all directorates in Council to meet the specific needs of a target audience such as the West Wyalong Visitor Guide, Community and Business Guide and the Bland Shire New Residents Package. Future reproductions of such publications must reflect Council's corporate image and identity.

14. Social Media

Community usage of social media is ever increasing. Anyone using or intending to use social media in their capacity as a staff member or Councillor must refer to Council's Social Media Policy.

Definitions:

Committee – a committee of Council

Council Committee – A committee established by resolution of Council

Council Committee Member – A person other than a councillor or member of staff who is a member of a council committee

Councillor – a person elected or appointed to civic office and includes the Mayor.

Delegate of Council -A person (other than a councillor or member of staff) or body, and the individual members of that body, to whom a function of Council is delegated.

Responsibilities:

This policy applies to all Council employees, Councillors, Council committee members, delegates of Council and contractors working for Council.

References:

This Communications Policy has been developed taking the following relevant Council documents into consideration:

- Your Vision Our Future - Community Strategic Plan
- Your Vision Our Future - Delivery Plan
- Your Vision Our Future - Operational Plan
- Community Grants and Donations Policy
- Councils Code of Conduct
- Customer Service Charter
- Social Media Policy
- Records Management Policy

Authorisation:

Status	Committee	N/A	
	Manex	N/A	
Owner	Director Corporate, Community & Development Services		
EDRMS Doc. ID	521596		
Superseded Policy	Website Policy		
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18 June 2013	0		
4 August 2015	1		September 2016

Related Council Policy / Procedure