

Corporate Policy and Procedure



Policy	Media Relations Policy
Category	Corporate
Authority	Strategic Communications and Community Engagement
Related Policies	Access and Privacy Policy Code of Conduct Policy Responsible Computing Policy City of Guelph social media guidelines for employees Good Service Standards
Approved By	Lisa Duarte, General Manager SCCE
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Policy Statement

The City of Guelph recognizes a strategic approach to media relations that is open, honest, and is crucial to building mutually beneficial and trusting relationships with news media. Such relationships will help foster accurate, balanced, and fair reporting; help the City to convey information through media to audiences; increase positive coverage; and protect and enhance the City’s reputation. Media also has a role to play on behalf of the community in holding the City to account for its actions.

Purpose

This policy outlines who can interact with media in an official capacity on behalf of the City, and when, how, and why to initiate or respond to inquiries from media outlets.

The Strategic Communications and Community Engagement (SCCE) department leads the organization’s media relations activities, but all City employees have a role to play in building co-operative and mutually beneficial relationships between the City and media. For designated or approved spokespeople this includes responding to media inquiries in a timely manner with accurate and clear information.

Definitions

City spokesperson

A spokesperson is a City employee who has the authority to make statements to representatives of the media on behalf of the organization and who has been trained to do so. Spokespeople are expected to respond to media inquiries that come through staff in the SCCE department, promptly and to respect requested deadlines from journalists.

Interview

An interview is a structured conversation between members of the media and spokespeople. Interviews can take place over email, phone, live video calls or in person including at events the City is hosting or participating in.

Media

Media refers to members of news media outlets that provide news stories to the public via traditional news media (print, radio, and television), online news sites, and blogs or podcasts where the authors are identified and follow accepted principles and ethics of journalism.

At the request of staff in the SCCE department, designated City spokespeople are expected to participate in interviews with journalists and/or bloggers who:

- identify themselves and any affiliation they may have with print, broadcast, or online media outlets, and
- conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the [Canadian Association of Journalists' Principles for Ethical Journalism and Ethics Guidelines](#).

Media monitoring

Media monitoring is the practice of tracking and reviewing stories about City business to assess potential issues, address errors, and analyze media outreach efforts, and to share relevant content with City employees.

Public discussion

A discussion is public when any audience external to the organization can see or hear the statements being made by employees and includes:

- media interviews
- public presentations or meetings (e.g., meetings of Council or committees of Council)
- open houses and other engagement events
- community events that the City participates in/has a presence at (e.g., Multicultural Festival, Ribfest)
- posts, comments, and questions on websites, blogs, and social media sites
- sometimes email (e.g., public inquiries or customer service exchanges)

When participating in discussions on social media employees are expected to understand the difference between personal use, professional use, and official use as described in the [City's social media commenting guidelines for employees](#).

Scope

This policy applies to all Corporation of the City of Guelph full-time, part-time, casual, temporary workers, volunteers, interns, and co-op placements. Unless expressly permitted in their contract, contractors and other third parties hired by the City are not permitted to speak to media on behalf of the City and must refer all media inquiries to City staff.

This policy does not apply to elected officials, Guelph Police Services, Guelph Public Library staff and board members, River Run Centre employees, and other City-connected boards and agencies that operate independently of the Corporation of the City of Guelph.

The policy addresses how employees interact with representatives of the media in line with the City's mission and values, and [One City. One Voice. Shared Purpose.](#), the City's multi-year plan for how the organization communicates and engages with people inside and outside the organization, specifically:

- help City employees, regardless of their role, understand that we represent one organization; the City, and every interaction we have with people reflects all of us,
- improve and increase two-way, audience-centric communications and engagement,
- put inclusivity at the core of City communications and engagement efforts, and
- enhance the City's relationship with local media.

This policy also aligns with strategic direction in the City's [2024-2027 Strategic Plan, Future Guelph](#), specifically:

- increase trust and transparency, and
- deepen engagement with the community by improving access to and satisfaction with local government.

Procedure

Identifying spokespeople

Employees whose position includes a default responsibility for acting as spokespeople and responding to inquiries from the media are:

- the Mayor
- the City's Executive Team
- general managers or designate (with consultation by SCCE)
- managers, and
- staff in the SCCE department.

Where appropriate and supported by the SCCE team, other City employees may be authorized to speak to media on the recommendation of their manager.

Any staff person responsible for acting as a designated spokesperson as identified above, and others appointed by their manager, are required to take the City's media spokesperson training before speaking with media.

City staff will not act as spokespeople for other City divisions, departments, or service areas without prior approval, and can only speak to topics agreed on and for which there are approved messages prepared.

SCCE will recommend and confirm designated spokespeople for planned media outreach through communications planning, and for other inquiries as they arise based on the topic and sensitivity of the inquiry. If any staff member is uncertain about their role in responding to a specific inquiry, they should contact their designated SCCE support staff.

Initiating media relations

All City-initiated media relations activities (media advisories, briefings, news releases, and pitches) are led by the SCCE department. The Mayor's Office has dedicated staff resources who may initiate media relations on behalf of Mayor and Council; notice of any planned media activities will be shared with SCCE for coordination purposes.

Responding to media inquiries

The City will promptly acknowledge receipt of and strive to respond to all media inquiries received during regular City Hall business hours by the deadline requested by a representative of the media, typically within a few hours to a day. The risk of not responding is the publication of an unbalanced story or misinformation and an overall loss of trust.

Where a response cannot be provided by the requested deadline, SCCE department staff will advise the journalist of the reason for the delay and indicate when a response can be expected.

The City reserves the right to refuse to respond to media requests where an outlet and/or representative does not transparently disclose their identity.

Media inquiries resulting from planned (City-initiated) media outreach

Any media inquiries resulting from planned outreach (e.g., media advisories and events, media releases) will be funneled through SCCE staff to subject matter experts who are identified as the spokesperson. These staff will have completed media training and will be prepared to answer questions from the media. The designated SCCE support staff will ensure any such inquiries are tracked.

Media inquiries initiated by journalists

Except in cases where a media inquiry is simply seeking confirmation or clarification of publicly available information (e.g., service hours, event or meeting dates, a copy of a posted bylaw or policy, clarity of publicly posted information), unplanned or unexpected media inquiries initiated by journalists (e.g., cold calls in response to current events, community conversations) during regular business hours will be directed to their designated SCCE support regardless of whether or not the recipient of the request is a designated City spokesperson or not.

Staff will collect and provide the following information to SCCE:

1. Name
2. Media outlet
3. Contact information (email and/or phone number)
4. Topic/line of inquiry
5. Deadline

Members of the media are encouraged to contact communications@guelph.ca with their inquiries so that staff in SCCE can facilitate a timely response.

Staff in SCCE are responsible for identifying and preparing spokespeople in response to media-initiated inquiries, arranging interview logistics with media, and for internal logging and reporting on the inquiry.

In cases where there is a minor or moderate operational service disruption (e.g., water main break, traffic interruption, spills response), City staff may be required to respond to media inquiries outside of business hours. These inquiries will be addressed by pre-designated, trained spokespeople and reported to staff in SCCE following the response.

Media inquiries about sensitive information

In cases where the subject of an inquiry is about a known or potentially contentious issue including pending litigation, exposure to litigation, information about City employees, or unplanned service disruptions, staff in the SCCE department will notify the Manager of Strategic Communications, the GM of SCCE, the DCAO and GM of any departments to which the inquiry relates, and the CAO and City Solicitor as appropriate before responding.

Media inquiries about an official emergency response

Guelph Fire Service and Guelph-Wellington Paramedic Service have designated media spokespeople (chiefs, deputy chiefs, and commanders) who are authorized to speak with media during emergency response situations. Any staff not authorized to speak on these matters should direct inquiries to SCCE or the relevant emergency response team.

Media inquiries during a crisis or declared state of emergency

During a crisis or declared state of emergency, the City's Emergency Communications Plan comes into effect and a designated Information Officer is appointed to be the main point of contact for media and will manage all media inquiries.

Media inquiries about recommendations to and decisions of Council

City staff must not make judgements about decisions of Council nor present information or make statements that could be seen to presume what Council will decide before Council formally makes a decision. City staff will also not make statements that presume to understand any Council member's reason for the decisions and direction of Council.

Personal point of view

During public discussions and media interviews, employees acting as City spokespeople are expected to convey the official position of the Corporation of the City of Guelph. City staff will not make any reference to their respective personal point of view.

Requests for information from the public (customer service)

Per the City's customer service policy, all employees are encouraged to answer general or routine inquiries that pertain to their area of work and provided the information is already public (e.g., published in public reports or posted on the City's website).

Addressing errors in published media stories

City of Guelph staff will seek corrections and provide accurate information where reporting is believed to be factually incorrect. SCCE staff can assist with this if needed.

Media relations outreach and support tools

Staff in the SCCE department guides the strategic direction of the City's media relations program and leads all corporate media relations efforts on behalf of the organization. As part of strategic communications plan development, communications staff consider a project's, program's, or service's goals and target audiences to determine which media relations tools will support achieving the stated goals.

Media outreach tools include news releases, media advisories, official statements, briefings, pitches, and op-eds.

Staff in SCCE draft/lead media outreach materials/efforts for departments and will be listed as the contact person. Departments review and approve these materials before they are shared publicly.

Note: designated staff in the Economic Development and Tourism Services department draft media outreach materials regarding their business and programs. These materials must be coordinated with, reviewed, and approved by SCCE.

Outreach tools

News release

News releases are written and issued to media outlets for the purpose of announcing something new (decisions, approvals, project start or completion) or unusual (first, only), or a change (e.g., service reduction or change, program cancellation, senior staff changes). Recurring announcements, events and engagement opportunities, and seasonal information are communicated in public notices.

News releases are available in the City's newsroom for a period of one to two years depending on the type of announcement, (e.g., news about City staff changes - hiring, departures, retirements) and annually recurring information (e.g., City's credit rating, annual reports) are posted for a period of one year; news announcement about funding, new programs, or service changes are posted for a period of two years.

Staff changes

The City will issue a news release to announce the following staff changes:

- Any change on the executive team
- Hiring of all general managers

Media advisory

A media advisory is an invitation for media to attend an in-person event for the purpose of sharing a story with their audiences. It explains who will be present and/or speak at an event, where and when the event is being held, and why it is newsworthy. An advisory typically includes information about unique photo, video, and interview opportunities to encourage media attendance, and any other details relevant to reporters covering the event (e.g., where to park). The City uses media advisories for announcements about funding support from other levels of government, ground breakings and openings, and media briefings for major projects or emerging situations (e.g., updates on issues of public safety).

Official statements

Official statements may be issued by the Mayor or the chief administrative officer. Typically, the people in these positions, with input from SCCE staff, will discuss and determine who is best to issue a particular statement.

Statements are most often issued to recognize a current event (e.g., appointment or passing of members of Parliament, Council, or the Crown; catastrophic events resulting in mass fatalities), observance of a day of significance (e.g., Day of recognition for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls), or in response

to broad economic and/or social issues (e.g., provincial or federal budgets or other legislation that affects municipalities; emerging local crises the City is responding to).

Media pitches

A media pitch is a short communication, typically an email or phone call, suggesting a news story to a journalist or editor at a media outlet. The goal of a pitch is to generate coverage and determine if media is interested in creating a story around the content. Media pitches can provide outlets with exclusive stories, particularly where a journalist has previously shown specific interest in a topic. The subject and type of content of a pitch needs to match the medium of the outlet, for example, good soundbites for radio and exciting or interesting visuals for television and must be of relevance to the outlet's audiences.

Op-eds

An op-ed is a column of about 750 words that represents the informed, focused opinion and expertise of the writer on an issue of relevance to a target audience. Op-eds are a type of persona essay that present a clearly defined and scoped topic from the voice of the writer (first person). Op-eds may be submitted as a response to current events or stories about the organization for which the City wants to provide a different viewpoint or may form a regular column series. Op-ed content needs to inform and engage readers and can be used to stimulate public debate.

Annual media open house

Annually, the SCCE department hosts an open house for members of the media to:

- Meet SCCE staff face-to-face (virtual or in-person)
- share topics of personal interest
- discuss the current state of media and the overall media landscape
- share feedback on the City's media relations efforts, and
- offer ideas for addressing any pain points in current interactions with City spokespeople and SCCE staff.