

# Communications and Engagement Policy

Version No	V3
Approved By	Board
Approval Date	29 April 2024
Next Review Date	April 2027

## Purpose

This policy aims to ensure Westernport Water's communications and engagement activities are accessible, accurate, responsive, and responsible. It aims to protect and enhance our reputation and sets out our expectations for employees when speaking publicly about our products and services.

## Scope

This policy:

- applies to all Westernport Water employees, directors and contractors
- **aims to protect and enhance Westernport Water's reputation in the community**
- provides clarification for communications standards and existing obligations under the Victorian Public Sector Code of Conduct
- provides guidance on the delegations and approval processes, ensuring a transparent and efficient framework for the approval and distribution of communications
- aims to reduce operational and reputation risks by defining the principles and responsibilities for engagement

## Key Principles

External communication from Westernport Water must:

- inform the public about key decisions, projects, policies and activities to enhance public understanding of Westernport Water's operations
- be clear and concise, ensuring that individuals can effectively access and understand information shared
- be timely, relevant and tailored to meet customer needs and reach the intended target audience
- be for a legitimate purpose and without bias towards any political affiliation

- provide essential and timely updates to the community in times of a crisis or emergency
- ensure the highest standard of decency in the portrayal of gender and sexuality and remain sensitive to cultural needs, recognising that people have a right to accessible information
- be compliant with relevant legislation and support Victorian Government policy.

From an engagement perspective, we commit to ensuring customer, community and stakeholder engagement is:

- meaningful; the process of engagement is genuine and informs a final decision
- inclusive; the engagement is respectful, inclusive and accessible i.e. the engagement design is human-centered and enables the full participation of all who wish to be involved.
- transparent; the engagement is clear and open about what stakeholders can and cannot influence i.e. explaining why some decisions can be influenced by engagement, while others cannot.
- informed; the engagement provides relevant and timely information i.e. giving stakeholders the knowledge and time to provide informed contributions.
- accountable; the engagement is high quality and responsive to the public i.e. planning must ensure that the purpose, scope and objectives are clear. Engagement risks must be understood and mitigated.

## Key Responsibilities

Communications and the media

**Westernport Water's Delegations Manual provides guidance in relation to communications activities. Within the manual, staff will find details of delegations and protocols designed to ensure a cohesive and consistent approach to all aspects of communication.**

- The Manager of Communications and Engagement is responsible for handling all media enquiries/requests. In cases where additional information is required for a response, the team will seek information from managers and subject matter experts to gather the necessary details. This information will be compiled and presented to the respective General Manager and the MD for approval.
- The Managing Director is the primary spokesperson for Westernport Water and has the authority to issue verbal and written statements to the media. A media statement is a verbal or written statement to a representative of a media organisation on behalf of Westernport Water.
- General Managers are authorised to issue media statements if the information is consistent with advice previously provided. However, statements regarding the annual financial statements, significant corporate actions or strategic planning, require the approval of the Board.
- The Chair of the Board is authorised to speak on behalf of the organisation, particularly on matters relating to the Board and Government policy.
- Employees, including Directors, who wish to represent Westernport Water at public speaking engagements or submit papers/articles that reference Westernport Water, must obtain approval from the Managing Director. It is not appropriate to comment on Westernport Water business in a public forum if you do not have approval to represent the corporation.

#### Responding to the media

- All media enquiries/requests should be referred to and coordinated by the Manager of Communications and Engagement.
- Following internal authorisation, media statements and key messages must be provided to the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) Media Team for approval prior to release.
- Media approvals are a structured process designed to ensure that information released to the public is accurate, consistent, and compliant with relevant regulations. This process is integral to effective governance, public trust, and maintaining a positive public image.

#### Customer, Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Westernport Water is required by legislation to consider customer and community engagement when a proposed change or decision is likely to:

- impact on services or facilities for customers and community
- have a significant budgetary impact
- involve a level of conflict, controversy or sensitivity.

**Westernport Water's Delegations Manual and Project Management Framework provide guidance in relation to engagement.** Within the manual, staff will find details of delegations and protocols designed to ensure a cohesive and consistent approach to all aspects of engagement.

- The Manager of Communications and Engagement, Project Managers (as applicable) and Engagement Officers are responsible for ensuring that the principles and processes of the IAP2 Framework are followed.
- The Manager Communications and Engagement is responsible for overseeing engagement activities and initiatives including but not limited to, Strategic Communications and Engagement Strategies, customer engagement panels, surveys, water cafes and events.
- The Project Sponsors are responsible for ensuring timely information and updates are provided, fostering understanding and support for projects, and promoting transparency and accountability through clear communication of decision-making processes and outcomes.

## Roles and Responsibilities

Communications – refers to the strategic planning, development, and implementation of communication strategies to effectively inform, engage, and influence stakeholders about a specific policy initiative or program.

Customer, Community and Stakeholder Engagement as described by the Department of Energy, Environment, and Climate Action (DEECA) - is the planned and unplanned ways water corporations interact and relate to their partners, stakeholders, and communities. Engagement is undertaken across all aspects of the **water corporation's business and to achieve a range of outcomes, including participation in decisions, actions, or outcomes; building and maintaining relationships; and increasing community capacity for planning, action, and learning.**

Stakeholders – government agencies, educational institutions, industry groups and peak bodies.

## Brand application

A clear and consistent identity enables the public to recognise Westernport Water activities and increases brand awareness and trust in the community. All external communications must carry the appropriate Westernport Water brand and comply with Westernport **Water's Brand and Style Guide**.

The Communications and Engagement Team is the custodian of the Westernport Water brand and all representations of the brand must be approved prior to being distributed, unless the format and template has previously been approved. All third-party use of **Westernport Water's logo must be approved by the** Communications and Engagement Team.

## Individual consent

Prior written or verbal consent must be obtained before publishing a photo or video containing individuals and/or their personal property for communications purposes. Individual content may be used without explicit consent in situations where obtaining consent is impractical (e.g., crowd shots at public events).

All use of individual content will comply with applicable data protection and privacy laws. Individuals have the right to revoke their consent at any time, and their content will be promptly removed from communication materials upon request. Content will be used for a predefined period of up to three years, after which it will be reviewed for continued use or removal.

## Social media

### Social and our commitment

Westernport Water values the immediacy of social media as a communication and engagement tool. We commit to timely responses and engagement with the community through various social media platforms consistent with our strategy. This includes providing updates on approved projects, policies, activities, and ongoing campaigns.

Specific roles have been established to manage digital content across various channels. This includes content creation, monitoring, and maintaining an active and constructive dialogue with customers and the community.

### Social in private capacity

When employees engage in social media in a private capacity, they are reminded that their comments are public and can be reproduced in other media. Regardless of whether social media is used officially or in a private capacity, employees are expected to adhere to the same professional standards outlined in the VPS Code of Conduct. This includes maintaining respect, integrity, and confidentiality in all online interactions, and not doing anything that may adversely affect their standing as a public sector employee.

## Communications campaigns

The development of all creative communications for campaign purposes requires pre-approval in line with the Delegations Manual. Advertising and communications campaigns must be submitted to the Communications and Engagement Team to facilitate approval as part of the annual Whole-of-Government advertising approval

process (Master Agency Media Services Contract). Campaign advertising must be appropriately managed, provide value for money, and be delivered within budget.

## Key reference documents

- **Westernport Water's Communications and Engagement Plan 2023-26**
- VPS Code of Conduct
- Westernport Water Delegations Manual
- Westernport Water Crisis Communications Plan.
- Westernport Water Project Management Framework
- International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)
- Public Engagement Framework 2021-2025 (Victorian Government).

## Review Date

This policy is to be reviewed every three years and approved by the Board. The Policy will continue until replaced by a later version or rescinded.

## RESPONSIBLE OFFICER

Policy Owner – General Manager, Corporate & Customer

Responsible Policy Officer – Manager Communications and Engagement.