

**16.1 MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS SERVICES TO COUNCIL****Responsible officer:** Jason Taylor, Chief Executive Officer**Attachments:** Nil

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<b>Section under the Act</b>	The grounds on which part of the Council or Committee may be closed to the public are listed in Section 90(2) & (3) of the <i>Local Government Act 1999</i> .
<b>Sub-clause and Reason:</b>	(b)(i) and (c) - information the disclosure of which could reasonably be expected to confer a commercial advantage on a person with whom the council is conducting, or proposing to conduct, business, or to prejudice the commercial position of the council and information the disclosure of which would reveal a trade secret.

**Executive Summary**

The purpose of this report is to enable Council to determine whether to engage a media and communications firm to provide services to Council.

Commshake is recommended as a suitable media and communications service provider. This firm could ensure Council is well placed to continue to effectively respond to the media, wider community and stakeholders in a professional, timely and positive manner.

Commshake could also assist Council to expand its media effectiveness and presence.

Council needs additional media support for the Mayor as Council's principal spokesperson and also to support any other elected members delegated by the Mayor to speak on behalf of Council. Council's senior staff would also benefit from access to media and communications expertise.

**RECOMMENDATION**

That Council engages Commshake Media + Engagement on a 12-month retainer contract for media and communications support at a cost of \$500 per month (or \$6000 per year) (excluding GST) and with subsidised hourly rates for work in excess of the retainer, or for specific projects or training.

**MOVED COUNCILLOR MICK SPARNON****SECONDED COUNCILLOR REBECCA BOSELEY**

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**CARRIED.**

## Background

Commshake Media + Engagement is a public relations and communications agency based in Murray Bridge. The firm provides services to Murraylands and Riverland Regional Development Australia, Rural City of Murray Bridge, Renmark Paranga, Mid Murray and Karoonda East Murray councils. This firm can provide councils with: the preparation of media releases; coaching to elected members related to radio interviews; preparation of responses to media; assistance to minimise negative local campaigns against council; event promotion, etc.

We have used this firm together with Coorong and Karoonda East Murray to manage the winding up of the Murray Mallee Transport Scheme, with great success. We have also used this firm as part of the regional StarClub arrangements.

## Context

A firm such as this is an essential resource to support the mayor, delegated elected members or delegated senior staff to provide media and communications on behalf of Council. Media and communication must occur in an extremely timely manner and in a clear and positive tone to ensure we continue to shine a positive light on our organisation and community. Such a firm can be very nimble in its support to us and response to the media.

The Mayor is legislated as Council's primary media spokesperson. As such most organisations have an in-house staff member or team or an external provider to support the mayor in this role. But also to coordinate all media and communications in a positive and proactive way.

Such staff/external providers undertake drafting of media material, iterations of information, coaching and coordination. They also scan media content and identify opportunities for council to communicate locally and beyond.

Media and communications arrangements need to work regardless of who the mayor, elected members or senior staff are.

## Policy and statutory implications

The Local Government Act 1999 provides at Clause 58 the following:

*58—Specific roles of principal member*

***(1) The role of the principal member of a council is—***

*(a) to preside at meetings of the council;*

*(b) if requested, to provide advice to the chief executive officer between council meetings on the implementation of a decision of the council;*

***(c) to act as the principal spokesperson of the council;***

*(d) to exercise other functions of the council as the council determines;*

*(e) to carry out the civic and ceremonial duties of the office of principal member.*

***(2) Subsection (1)(c) does not apply in circumstances where a council has appointed another member to act as its principal spokesperson.***

Council's Media and communications policy and Procurement policy are relevant to this matter.

Effective media and communications plays a vital role in Council achieving its Strategic Management Plan strategy of *strengthening our brand and market presence*.

## Issues

Commshake has provided us with their ***Top 5 reasons for local government authorities to work proactively with the media:***

1. Free advertising / comms tool: Most importantly, there is an absolute requirement for Councils to regularly communicate with their communities, and local media is a simple and comprehensive way to do this – especially when we want to promote the positive work/projects/programs of Council, or seek engagement with the community on a project. Capturing a half page article in the local paper says a lot more about an organisation, than having to pay for an ad placement that people tend to skim over (or ignore completely). These articles which go to print, are often then seen online on media websites and via their social media platforms as well – giving media articles a ‘triple-dip’ at coverage.
2. Lead the message yourself with facts: We all know how the rumour mill and squeaky wheels work in small communities, which is why it’s absolutely vital to be proactive in messaging and communication to people about key issues which are likely to gain interest. By proactively issuing media statements to outlets that we know people are going to read – we can circumvent much of the rumour mill by leading the message on these key areas (instead of being led by misinformed minorities). When done well, this can help projects run smoothly and abate negative community angst.
3. Build trust with your ratepayers and community: Regular communication/engagement with your ratepayers helps ensure your community feels informed about key projects and issues of interest. This is a major feature of working towards a transparent government culture, and as mentioned above, can often mitigate issues before they get out of control. There’s also an opportunity to use this messaging format to maximise your community engagement potential – it can often encourage dialogue on projects the Council is seeking feedback on and reiterate the community’s feeling of being ‘heard’.
4. Build relationships that will work to your advantage: By providing the local/regional media with insights and details of what’s happening in their readership patch – we’re saving them time and energy – which is a good thing in the currently under-resourced media environment of Australia. Regional journalists have less time to report on new than ever before, so the more we can provide them, the more likely they often are to run something. Further, if we can provide local reporters with ‘page-fillers’ on a semi-regular basis and timely comment from Council leaders – then we show them that we value them personally, and their industry - and we start to build an important relationship with them, which will eventually work in our favour (ie. when the Council needs a return favour, this relationship comes in to play).
5. Build reputation amongst peers, industry, state: Positive news coverage can also support economic opportunities for the Council. For example, picking up coverage for projects in State or national news might attract new visitors to the local townships to see specific artworks, projects, playgrounds etc. Or news on development opportunities might then link to potential investors or industry leaders. It can also (and has for some of our clients in the past) helped as a recruitment tool for Council where people stand up and pay attention to what you’re doing.

Council's Media and communications policy seeks to effectively respond to the media, wider community and stakeholders in a professional, timely and positive manner. The best way to ensure professional, timely and positive media and communications is to have in place the necessary media resources and skills.

Commshake is the only media and communications firm that has been approached to date as they are local to our region, we have had some experience with them, a number of our neighbouring councils use this firm and they are highly regarded and we know their rates are very competitive compared to metropolitan media firms.

#### Commshake services

Commshake can provide the following services:

Monthly media support - during the week prior to the Council meeting each month, the team reviews the agenda and its reports/attachments and maps out any key items that will be of media interest (state/national/local). This may include positive/proactive news items for public relations campaigns; community engagement media-led items that may need to be released to media to inform/educate/engage with local people, and/or issue-related media advice which may include preparing holding statements or mitigating potential issues in the media from contentious Council issues.

Media Monitoring – Commshake sets up alerts and systems to monitor all media mentions of the Southern Mallee and its projects/townships to ensure they can update key staff on emerging media issues and deal with them as they arise through various communications/media approaches.

Media advisory – Commshake provide 1-1 support for staff within the Council prior to launching projects on media and communications strategies. This can range from anything between a 30 minute phone call for advice – through to a full communications/engagement plan.

Public relations campaigns - For specific/unique projects/news Commshake develop major public relations campaigns which support strategic outcomes for the Council (ie. economic benefits, drive visitation, lobby governments, consultation projects etc).

Media training - Commshake can deliver media training for the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and other delegated elected members and senior staff who take on media activity.

Other communications support – support to Council with research, writing, policy and guideline development and strategy on grants/award writing, communication planning, website content/management, promotional/marketing collateral and more.

#### Recommended package

Based on our needs Commshake has recommend a 12-month retainer contract for media and communications support. This would cost a minimum of \$500/month+GST (or \$6000/year+GST) and is scalable for busier periods. Commshake has had a quick look at recent agenda items, and consider that this would give them the minimum time needed to review the agenda and prepare a monthly media plan for us, plus some writing/public relations strategy. If there are significant projects, this figure would be more, but would be only at the discretion of Council.

This package buys the Council a minimum of 5hrs of Commshake team's time each month, and also provides the following:

*When clients sign-on to a 12-month retainer contract with Commshake, they are provided with our priority, award-winning support from our highly skilled, experienced and responsive team. Key features of our retainer packages include:*

- **24/7 support:** Out-of-hours support for crisis communications (if/when required), including face-to-face visits to the office/project site as required
- **Exclusive access:** Access to our entire team (as required) and extra PR opportunities through our extensive network of State and National contacts
- **Priority:** Priority focus for key projects over/above casual project work
- **Cost-effective:** Significant discounts on our hourly support rate (from regular casual rate of \$150/hr to between \$100 - \$120/hr)
- **Added extras:** Complementary access to key elements of our digital software subscriptions (including social media scheduling systems, document management systems, global pro image access, design elements, other)
- **Training savings:** Staff training is delivered at the agreed-upon hourly rate to as many people as required (non-contracted casual training rate is minimum \$150 - \$170/hr)
- **Travel savings:** Travel costs for site visits discounted

#### **Alternate options**

Council could decide not purchase media and communications advice and assistance. This would negatively impact our ability to effectively respond to the media, wider community and stakeholders in a professional, timely and positive manner.

#### **Financial implications**

The total cost is a minimum of \$500 per month +GST (or \$6000 per year +GST).

#### **Work Health and Safety and Risk implications**

This report raises no new work health and safety issues. A poor media performance or lack of media and communications all have a considerable negative impact on Council's reputation and even the morale of the community.

#### **Consultation**

This matter has been discussed directly with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor and through email communication with all elected members.

Commshake has had verbal and email communications with the CEO on this matter and has provided a detailed recommended proposal.