

STRADBROKE PARISH COUNCIL

Communication Policy

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1. Introduction and Scope

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and provides guidance on communication, social media and contact with press & media – 3 model policies or protocols published by SLCC have been combined into one single overarching Communication Policy.

Stradbroke Parish Council articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the local community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

The overall aim is to make council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what Stradbroke Parish Council does, whilst also enabling Stradbroke Parish Council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications between council members and with third parties.

2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable Stradbroke Parish Council to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the parish, the district and region.
- be an effective voice of the community
- maintain and enhance the reputation of Stradbroke Parish Council
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of Stradbroke Parish Council or the parish.

3. General Communication Principles

- a. Councillors and employees of the Council are expected to maintain an awareness of confidentiality of information that they have access to and not share this with anyone.
- b. Councillors should be careful only to 'cc' essential recipients on emails, for instance to avoid the use of the 'reply all' option if at all possible – only copying in those who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed. Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary.
- c. When writing any communication always assume that it may be disclosed.
- d. Be civil and tasteful and keep the communications relevant and concise.
- e. Always write emails or social media content as if they are permanent, because even when they have been deleted, they can often be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court or the Information Commissioner's Office. Internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.
- f. Information in communications may not be confidential but may contain sensitive information that needs to be respected.
- g. Always respect the privacy of others.
- h. Do not write anything in communications that might be construed as offensive or discriminatory.
- i. Do not make negative comments about an individual, including members of the public, Councillors, employees of the Council or business suppliers.

- j. Use a Parish Council signature so that it is clear in what capacity you are writing.
- k. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.
- l. Be aware of copyright and give credit where credit is due.
- m. If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure.

4. Correspondence via letter or email

- a. The point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed.
- b. The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.
- c. The Chair will be the most appropriate person to deal with correspondence in the absence of the Clerk e.g. to sign letters giving effect to a council decision, or to send a 'holding' reply pending consideration of a matter by the Council.
- d. No individual Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council, a committee, sub-committee or working party. In particular, Councillors do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.
- e. Most official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letter headed paper or the official clerk@stradbrokepc.org email account.
- f. Should a Councillor send correspondence either via letter or email, a copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk, and it be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.
- g. If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a Councillor, the matter should be referred to the Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain in accordance with the Parish Council's Publication Scheme.
- h. Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (e.g. copy to XX).
- i. Any correspondence sent to a Councillor or the Clerk (including emails) become official and will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

5. Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Parties

- a. Agenda should be clear and concise. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision, and for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- b. Councillors must ensure that they have read and understand any documents for discussion and come to meetings able to make an informed decision or identify information that is required in order for them to do so.
- c. Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- d. Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.
- e. A Councillor or employee of the Council must not disclose information that is of a confidential nature. This includes any discussion on any matter which has been discussed under confidential items on a Council's or Committee's meeting, unless the disclosure is necessary for the Clerk, as Proper Officer, to obtain independent or legal advice.

6. Guidance on Interaction

- a. Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council.
- b. All comments must accurately reflect the Council's position on a topic; as adopted in official documents: for example minutes and policies.
- c. Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of the Council or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the Council or members of the community.
- d. Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to legal advice taken before any response is made.
- e. Parish Council business should not be discussed in emails between all Councillors. All Council business should be conducted in public and any correspondence between Councillors on matters may be published as part of the Council's openness and transparency in decision making.
- f. Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with villagers in relation to their own personal views but should always make it clear that:
 - (i) their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the views of Stradbroke Parish Council;
 - (ii) other councillors may hold a different view;
 - (iii) the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by Stradbroke Parish Council;
 - (iv) and, if appropriate, should copy the Clerk.
- g. **Councillors should acknowledge their emails when requested to do so.**

7. Communications with Parish Council Staff

- a. Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub-committee with appropriate delegated powers from the Council).
- b. No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the Council, the Chair of a committee or sub-committee, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- c. Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Council.
- d. Meetings with the Clerk or other employees:
 - Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
 - Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular employee;
 - Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.
 - Councillors should acknowledge their emails when requested to do so.
- e. A Councillor should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability or an employee at meetings held in public.
- f. No matters relating to staff or staffing matters should be discussed in "round robin" emails; ie copying all Councillors. The Parish Council has a duty to be able to provide 3 independent Councillors to review complaints about, or grievances from, staff and therefore correspondence on staffing matters should be sent to the Chairman of the Personnel Committee.
- g. **Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated.**

8. Social Media

- a. The Parish Council has a website and a Facebook page:
 - Website: stradbrokepc.org
 - Facebook page: [@StradbrokePC](https://www.facebook.com/StradbrokePC)

- b. The Parish Council will always use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Parish Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers.
- c. The website and Facebook page are not monitored 24/7, and the Council will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, the Council will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. Please do not include personal or private information in your social media posts to the Council.
- d. Sending a message/post via Facebook or the website will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and the Council's staff will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requires for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Council's Clerk and/or members of the Council by emailing:
 - Clerk: clerk@stradbrokepc.org
 - Councillors are issued with a council email account which has the format firstname.surname@stradbrokepc.org.
 - Up to date contact information can be found on the "About The Council" page of the Council's website: <https://www.stradbrokepc.org/councillors>
- e. The Council retains the right to remove comments or content that include:
 - obscene or racist content;
 - personal attacks, insults, or threatening language;
 - potentially libellous statements;
 - plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws. Including copyright;
 - information or links unrelated to the content of the forum;
 - commercial promotions or spam;
 - alleged breaches of the Council's policy or the law.

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of the Council's policy, or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given the limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page. The Council may post a statement that "A post breaching the Council's Communication Policy has been removed". If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law, the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.
- f. Councillors who post on social media must observe the Code of Conduct. Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share. Being a Councillor does not prevent a member of the public from pursuing legal action following the publication of an untrue statement and Councillors may be held personally liable.
- g. Any Councillor posting, referring to themselves as a Councillor – even if it is in a personal capacity – may be considered as acting in an official capacity.
- h. When posting to social media, it should be remembered that:
 - A Councillor is an elected representative of the Council;
 - Any post can affect the reputation of the Council;
 - It is the Council which is the corporate decision-making body – no Councillor can independently make decision for the Council over social media;
 - Some issues and communications are best left to the Council's official social media accounts;
 - Having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations;
 - The Council cannot be involved in party political issues;

- It is not necessary to respond or make comment on everything on social media – in fact sometimes it is better not to;
 - Posts must not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.
- i. The Council's Website:
- (i) Where necessary, the Council may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information. We may not respond to every comment we receive, particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.
 - (ii) The following items may be included on the website:
 - meeting dates;
 - current agendas;
 - minutes of past meetings;
 - financial information as required under the Transparency Code and the Practitioners' Guide;
 - policies and procedures;
 - Councillor information;
 - links to external websites such as Mid Suffolk District Council and Suffolk County Council.
 - (iii) The following items will NOT be included:
 - articles affiliated to, or promoting, any political organisation,
 - commercial advertisements.

9. Electronic Communication

- a. The Clerk is provided with a mobile telephone. Councillors and the Clerk may use SMS text messages as a convenient way to communicate at times.
- b. WhatsApp groups should not be used for:
 - Day to day discussion of, and views on, Council policies and their implementation;
 - As evidence of agreement / disagreement;
 - As an alternative to voting
 - An agreement of a specific course of action or financial commitment by the Council;
 - Providing feedback to other Councillors;
 - Proposing agenda items, sharing paper, notification in advance of apologies.
- c. Video conferencing may also be used as a medium to communicate for working groups, task & finish groups or steering groups.
- d. All are reminded that this policy applies to all forms of electronic communication.

10. Press & Media

- a. The Parish Council is accountable to the local community for its actions and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media – press, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Parish Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Parish Council and to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.
- b. It is important that the press have access to the Clerk/Councillors and to background information to assist them in giving accurate information to the public. To balance this, the Parish Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

- c. The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the governments Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The Council's adopted Standing Orders should also be adhered to.
- d. The Clerk and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media. Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers and private correspondence should not be leaked to the media.
- e. When the media wish to discuss an issue that is, or is likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be taken from the Council's solicitor before any response is made, therefore all media enquiries should be directed to the Clerk or the Chairman of the Council.
- f. There are a number of personal privacy issues for the Clerk and Councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address and telephone number (although Member contact details may be in the public domain); disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Clerk before any response is made to the media.
- g. When responding to approaches from the media, the Clerk or the Chairman of the Council are authorised to make contact with the media.
- h. Statements made by the Chairman and the Clerk should reflect the Council's opinion.
- i. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. Such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks. All correspondence must come from the Clerk.
- j. The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request.
- k. The media are encouraged to attend Council meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.
- l. The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council's position on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of the Clerk and Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.
- m. The Clerk or any Councillor may draft a press release, however they must all be issued by the Clerk in order to ensure that the principles outlined in point 10(c) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored. The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chair of the Council or the Chair of the relevant committee.
- n. Press reports from the Council, its committees or working party meetings should be from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- o. Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council.
- p. All media comment must accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic, as adopted in council documents; eg minutes and policies.
- q. The person responding to any media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able to speak with some authority, using plain English.
- r. Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, Councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that this is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as this personal view.
- s. Unless a Councillor is absolutely certain that they are reporting the view of the council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.

- t. Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of the Council or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the council or members of the community.
- u. Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement' to the media must clearly inform the media that:
 - their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of the Council;
 - other councillors may hold a different view;
 - the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by the Council.

To be read in conjunction with the Email & IT Policy

Reviewed and adopted:	14 th September 2026
Date for next review:	2 years or sooner should legislation dictate