



Communications Plan

(Adopted 13.09/15)

URALLA SHIRE COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

1. Purpose

The purpose of this Plan is to provide a framework that guides how Uralla Shire Council staff members communicate internally and with the public.

Clear and effective communication, with residents and between Council staff, is intrinsic to effective policy and service development. Having a Communication Plan is necessary to achieve ongoing improvements in open communication, both externally and internally.

2. Scope

This Plan applies to all employees of Council, including contractors, volunteers and people on work experience, to Councillors and to members of Community Consultative Panels and committees operating under Section 355 of the *Local Government Act 1993*.

This Plan encompasses the following:

- Benefits of Effective Communication;
- Principles of Good Communication;
- General Communication Standards;
- External Communication;
- Internal Communication;
- Communication between staff members and Councillors;
- Use of Communication Devices;
- Stakeholder Groups;
- Communication Methods;
- Use of Social Media.



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3. Aims

The aims of the Communication Plan and Policy are:

- To adhere to the best practice principles of effective communication;
- To improve staff satisfaction, retention, motivation, productivity, loyalty and relationships by enhancing internal communication;
- To ensure the public, Councillors and staff are informed of Uralla Shire Council's decisions, policies, programs, events and issues in a timely and accurate manner;
- To increase community knowledge, so that customers are aware of the services that Council provides and the constraints under which it operates;
- To increase community support for the services, activities and initiatives of Council.

4. The Benefits of Effective Communication

Effective communication provides a strong foundation upon which Council can develop and maintain relationships with the community, and can assist Council to achieve its goals in a timely manner. Specific benefits of effective communication include:

- Assistance in building a positive reputation, and attracting business and residents to the shire;
- Strengthening of relationships with stakeholder groups;
- Greater Community Engagement in Council activities and programs;
- Improvement of customer satisfaction levels;
- Improvement in staff morale and job satisfaction, leading to increased productivity and staff retention;
- Provision of a platform of strength from which to manage a crisis.



5. Principles of Good Communication

Staff members should use the following principles when undertaking communications programs or campaigns:

- **Visibility:** To commence or maintain a strong, two-way communication relationship with stakeholders, it is important to be as visible as possible. Use of Council branding and key messages are important ways of maintaining visibility;
- **Simplicity:** Communication must be simple and straightforward out of respect for people's time, and to cater for differences in literacy levels. Use Plain English and avoid jargon and acronyms;
- **Repetition:** A repetitive schedule should be devised for messages to ensure they get the community's attention. The more a message is repeated, the more people will pay attention;
- **Value:** Messages need to have value for the community. Use the "What's in it for me?" principle and let people know how Council's work affects them;
- **Variety:** To ensure a message is received by as many people as possible, use a range of communication methods. People access information through different methods, according to their learning styles, skills and preferences, so one method alone will not get the message out to the whole community;
- **Listening:** Feedback on issues needs to be encouraged and processed. Community members will not engage with Council if they think they are not being listened to;
- **Evaluation:** Communication programs need to be evaluated for effectiveness;
- **Consistency:** The principles outlined above need to be followed on all occasions, to ensure consistently effective communication.



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6. General Communication Standards

- Council will promote transparency and accountability in relation to its decision making process, and ensure the community is informed of key Council resolutions, services, programs and initiatives;
- Where appropriate, Council will represent the views of the community and act as an advocate to the State and Federal Governments;
- In all forms of communication, including verbal, printed or electronic, staff members are expected to adhere to the highest standards of ethical practice and professional competence;
- Staff members are to strive for excellence in customer service, in accordance with the Uralla Shire Council Customer Service Charter;
- Council branding must be used consistently, in accordance with the Uralla Shire Style Guide and Service Plans for individual business units;
- All Councillors and staff members who attend meetings, seminars and conferences are expected to act in a professional manner;
- Non-bureaucratic communication is expected, including using a “Plain English” style to write all documents;
- Speeches and presentations given by Councillors or Senior Staff are to be thoroughly researched and well-written;
- Staff who write reports will consider communications and community engagement implications;
- Councillors will be offered appropriate and adequate information and training in order for them to assist in communicating Council messages and decisions to the public;
- Managers and other relevant staff will participate in media, communication and public speaking training.



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7. External Communication

- Council will continue to produce a community newsletter every month, for distribution throughout the Shire;
- Council will continue to use the Community Engagement Strategy and associated toolkit, as well as Community Consultative Panels, to gauge the community's needs and opinions;
- Public access to Council documents will be in accordance with Uralla Shire's 'Access to Council Documents Policy';
- Council will take appropriate action in response to complaints from the public, in accordance with the Uralla Shire Council Complaints Handling Policy;
- All dealings with the media shall be in accordance with Council's Media Liaison Protocol;
- Each section of Council will develop key communication messages relating to its aims and functions, in conjunction with its Business Service Plans. Key messages will then be used consistently in external communication;
- Council will have a presence at major community events which it has sponsored in cash or in kind e.g. Seasons of New England;
- Council will develop protocols relating to the content of the Uralla Shire Council website;
- Council will maintain an up-to-date copy of the Uralla Shire policy register on the Council website, in accordance with the requirement of the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*;
- Council will use the events section of the website to list major community events in cases where information has been supplied by community organisations, as well as events associated with Council;
- The Visitor information Centre and Library will continue to use a variety of methods to promote community events, organisations and general information about Uralla e.g. flyers and brochures, online hubs, outdoor blackboards/sandwich boards.



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8. Internal Communication

- Council will foster a cooperative and collaborative approach to communication across divisions and worksites;
- In accordance with the 'Uralla Shire Council Workplace Standards of Conduct', all staff members are expected to work co-operatively with other team members, share appropriate information and treat everyone with respect and courtesy;
- In accordance with the 'Uralla Shire Workplace Standards of Conduct,' all managers and supervisors are expected to maintain strong working relationships and encourage open communication. This includes giving clear instructions, encouraging others to ask clarifying questions, listening to staff members' comments, providing a reasonable and realistic time frame for completion of tasks, giving constructive criticism and/or praise;
- All managers and supervisors are expected to keep staff well informed about issues that affect them e.g. training, new policies, procedures or legislation relevant to their roles;
- Employees are to be encouraged to share their ideas and suggestions for improvement with their supervisors;
- Appropriate action will be taken to resolve any workplace conflicts or misunderstandings in a timely fashion, in line with Council's 'Grievance and Disputes Policy' and its associated Procedures;
- Front counter staff are expected to relay messages and other information to the relevant staff member/s on the same day they are received;
- All staff are required to attend the General Manager's quarterly briefing sessions and are encouraged to ask questions at these;
- Council shall use the Work Health and Safety (WH&S) Committee to consult with staff regarding WH&S issues;
- Council shall use the Uralla Shire Council Consultative Committee to consult with staff regarding changes;
- Important information relevant to all staff is to be distributed via pay slip attachments in consultation with the Payroll Officer;
- Copies of the Council Meeting Minutes are sent out each month to all staff who have Council email addresses.

9. Communication between Staff and Councillors

- Communication between staff and Councillors should normally be channelled through the General Manager;
- In accordance with Council's 'Code of Conduct' and 'Provision of Information to and Interaction Between Councillors and Staff' policy, staff members other than the General Manager are not permitted to discuss operational matters with Councillors except at Council Meetings or if the Councillor is acting in a private capacity e.g. it is permissible for Councillors to directly contact staff about their personal rates, registration of their pets, or private Development Applications;
- In accordance with Council's 'Code of Conduct', Councillors conducting private business must receive **exactly** the same treatment and level of service as any other resident.

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10. Use of Communication Devices

- Council's 'IT User Agreement' and 'Use of Information Technology and Communications Resources Policy' govern usage of communication devices supplied by Uralla Shire;
- Council recognises that there will be occasions when it is necessary for staff members to contact family members or personal associates to attend to essential matters. To facilitate this and to encourage a flexible and family friendly workplace, Council will permit staff to have limited use of personal communication devices during work hours;
- Use of communication devices for purposes other than essential personal business should be confined to employee's personal time i.e. before or after work or during meal breaks.

11. Stakeholder Groups

The Local Government Association of South Australia has identified that most Australians fall into one of the following groups:

- a) People who are engaged and happy with their Council** – They have had positive experiences with their Council, and are advocates for it;
- b) Young, Inexperienced People** – this group is open minded, but doesn't know much about their Council's activities or Local Government in general;
- c) People who are engaged but unhappy** – They have had a bad experience with their Council, and this taints their opinion;
- d) Less engaged sceptics** – They are sceptical about Local Government in general, and don't think they get value for money.

Residents may move within these groups, according to the experiences they have with their Council. It is important to note that bad interactions create dissatisfaction, regardless of previous experiences. Good communication programs can overcome lack of awareness, but are less successful in combatting negativity. Therefore, it is imperative that communication programs are supported by high and consistent customer service standards.

The Local Government Association of South Australia's research suggested that overall residents tend to be:

- Satisfied with Councils' facilities and services;
- Unaware of Councils' strategic directions;
- Dissatisfied with community engagement.

This indicates the importance of using good communication principles to inform and educate people about Uralla Shire Council's activities and strategies and about the functions and constraints of Local Government in general.

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12. Communications Methods

What you say, how you say it and what you say it with all require equal consideration when trying to find the right balance between cost and effectiveness, consistency and repetition.

It is also important that Council's actions are in line with its messages. Making excessive promises or creating unrealistic expectations will only serve to create a very negative impression that is hard to reverse.

Different audiences will access, use and respond to different messages and media in quite varied ways. For example, young people may respond favourably to a website message that Council is committed to providing recreational activities for youth, whereas older people may not see the message or may think Council is wasting money. Therefore, it is important to always take audience into account when deciding which communication methods to use. Further information on communication methods is available in the Uralla Shire Council's Community Engagement Toolkit.

The matrix below highlights more effective communication methods for various target audiences:

Method	Councillors	Managers	Staff	Residents	Businesses	Media	NSW Gov't	Aust Gov't	Clubs
Website	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Email	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Newsletter	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Letterbox Drop	X			X	X				X
Advertising in Local Press	X			X	X				X
Media Releases	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Brochures	X	X	X	X	X				X
Noticeboards	X	X	X	X	X				X
Personal contact	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Events	X			X					X
Public Meetings	X			X					
Presentations	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

13. Social Media

Social media is the term used for internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information among people. It refers to user-generated information, opinion and other content shared over open digital networks.

Social media may include (but is not limited to) the following:

- Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn);
- Video and photo sharing websites (e.g. YouTube, Pinterest, Flickr);
- Blogs;
- Wikis and online collaborations (e.g. Wikipedia);
- Forums and discussion boards/groups (e.g. Google Groups);
- Podcasting and Video on Demand (VoD);
- Instant Messaging (including SMS).

Social media also includes other emerging electronic / digital communication applications.

Websites that include functionalities such comments sections, discussion areas and like buttons are also social media spaces.

At the time of writing, Uralla Shire Council is still formulating social media procedures. However, many Council officials use social media in a private capacity, and should understand the potential risks of damage to Council's reputation that may arise from personal use of social media.

Council's Code of Conduct states that Council officials are expected to "act in a way that enhances public confidence in the integrity of local government." This may extend to private online behaviour. While Council does not seek to discourage or unduly limit officials' private usage of social media, the following guidelines must be followed:

- Only discuss publicly available information;
- Do not imply that you are authorised to speak as a representative of the Council;
- Do not give the impression that the views you express are those of Council;
- Do not use council email addresses, council logos or other council branding, which may give the impression of official support of your comments;
- Never disclose any confidential or personal information obtained through carrying out Council duties;
- Do not use social media to threaten, harass, bully or discriminate against another Council official/contractor/volunteer;
- Do not mention your Council position when providing online endorsements, recommendations or referrals via social media.

14. Acknowledgements:

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Uralla Shire Council's Communications Plan has been informed and influenced by the following documents:

- Glen Innes Severn Council Communication Policy, 2014
- Glen Innes Severn Council Social Media Policy, 2013
- Gunnedah Shire Council Communications and Media Engagement Policy, 2012
- Local Government Association of South Australia Communications Plan and Guide, Draft Version, 2011



Disclaimer Information

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Version: 1

Version no.	Updated by:	Date:	Nature of changes
1	GM's Office	July 2015	