

Title:	Communications Policy
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Acknowledgement of Country

Murrindindi Shire Council is proud to acknowledge the Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Owners of the land we now call Murrindindi Shire.

We pay our respects to First Nations leaders and Elders, past, present and emerging, who are the keepers of history, traditions, knowledge and culture of this land.

We commit to working in collaboration with Traditional Owners of this land in a spirit of reconciliation and partnership.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to provide direction for Council's approach to its communication, including the use of communication tools and interactions with media. The Policy aims to ensure:

- Council communicates effectively across a range of platforms
- consistency in quality, accuracy and appropriateness of external communication
- transparency of communication between Council and the community
- our communications help build a positive reputation of Council and Murrindindi Shire
- that all communications are written, produced, and distributed in an accessible manner.

The intent of this policy is that all official Council communication will reflect Council's commitment to informing the community in a manner that is clear, concise, accurate, non-political and consistent with Council decisions and policies.

2. Rationale

Council's reputation is linked to the quality of its communication with the community. Inadequate, inaccurate or poorly-judged communication can damage the community's trust and confidence in Council's activities, decisions and effectiveness. Importantly, Council's external communication underpins its efforts to enhance community engagement across the Shire, and to ensure the transparency of Council's decisions and activities.

To be effective, Council's approach to communicating must be flexible and responsive. Council must use a diverse range of platforms to meet our community's different communication needs and preferences, while also ensuring best value for money.

3. Scope

This Policy applies to:

- representatives of Council (at all times and for all forms of communication) about Council's business, services, role or staff, councillors, contractors and volunteers
- all media and platforms by which Council communicates, including its social media channels and its community engagement platform

This Policy does not apply to

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- representatives of Council's private use of social media, where no reference is made or could be perceived to have been made, to Murrindindi Shire Council or representatives of Council, Council policies, practices or services, suppliers or other stakeholders.
 - However, Council's Codes of Conduct apply to all online activities at all times.

During a Council election, this Policy should be read in conjunction with the Murrindindi Shire Council Election Period Policy and Council's Governance Rules.

4. Definitions

Reference Term	Definition
Council Staff	Includes employees, contractors (agencies and individuals who provide services to the Council) volunteers and contractors appointed to undertake Council business.
Representatives of Council	Councillors and all Council staff (as defined above)
Media	Includes print, radio, television, video, social media, websites and other online channels.
Digital media	Digitised content that can be transmitted or broadcast via the internet, including text, images, audio, video, live-streamed content, graphics, online surveys and e-newsletters. Digital media also include platforms which can hold or transmit digitised content, including websites and social media.
Social Media	Any web-based or mobile technology to which people may add comment, contribute, create, forward, link, tag, post, upload and share digital or other content.
Intellectual Property	Describes the ownership of works that are a result of creativity and knowledge and are often intangible in nature, including trademarks, designs, logos, stories, songs or photos.
Printed Media (regardless of whether despatched in digitised form or otherwise)	Includes flyers, posters, bulk direct mailouts, letters, advertising, speeches, Frequently Asked Questions, surveys, forms, media releases, rates and animal registration notices, annual reports, council plans, articles, invitations, notices to the public, signage, noticeboards, banners, programs and calendars of events.
Corporate communications channels	All communications, except for Council's Discover Dindi channels.

5. Policy

5.1 Communication Principles

Council's external communication will be guided by the following principles:

- We will keep the community informed about what we are doing, give the community opportunities to engage in two-way conversation with us and the ability to participate meaningfully in the democratic process
- Our communication will be
 - inclusive and professional in tone
 - clear and unambiguous through use of plain language
 - free from jargon and acronyms
 - consistent in quality and style
- We will be responsive to our community through timely communication, by listening and by engaging with our communities
- We will target our communication to ensure it is relevant, useful and interesting

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- We will be strategic and creative in looking for new means by which to boost the reach of our communication and the communication methods and platforms we use will be informed by the needs of the community and customers
- Our communication will reflect a whole-of-organisation view
- We will respect other's Intellectual Property rights and expect others also to respect Council's Intellectual Property rights

The tone of, and standards, for Council's communication is set by *Murrindindi Shire Council's Style Guide* in association with the [Australian Government Style Manual](#). Both, the Guide and the Style Manual are to be used to assist in the production of all external Council communication. The Guide must also be observed when Council logos and branding assets are used by a third-party, e.g., by other government agencies, or for Council-sponsored projects or events.

5.2 Council's spokespersons

While all Councillors can make public statements, the Mayor (or Deputy Mayor, in the Mayor's absence) is Council's official spokesperson and is authorised to speak on behalf of Council. Close liaison between the Mayor and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is important to ensure timely and informed communication. The Mayor may delegate this authority to another councillor or officer of Council. This includes Councillors appointed to portfolios, who may act as the spokesperson on matters relating to their portfolio.

The CEO is the spokesperson for all operational matters, including regarding delivery of services and the implementation of Council policy. The CEO can delegate this responsibility to an officer of Council. In times of emergency, the CEO is Council's official spokesperson.

In the event of an approach by the media or other body seeking official comment or media appearances on behalf of Council, contact must be made in the first instance with Council's Communications Unit.

Council staff, contractors and volunteers are not authorised to speak on behalf of Council without express authorisation from the CEO. Public comments made as private community members, via any communication channel, need to clearly outline that they are personal opinions only.

In accordance with the Councillor Code of Conduct and Staff Code of Conduct, care needs to be given to ensure:

- Any statements do not bring Council or the organisation into disrepute
- Privacy and data security obligations are complied with, and only publicly available information is shared

The roles and responsibilities for each spokesperson are outlined in the following table:

Authorised Officer	Roles and Responsibilities
Mayor	Official spokesperson on all policy matters and decisions of the Council.
Deputy Mayor	Acts as the Mayor's delegated spokesperson if the Mayor is not available.
Councillors	Able to speak to the media in their capacity as individual Councillors.
CEO	Official spokesperson on high-level operational matters.
Directors	Official spokesperson as delegated by the CEO.
Managers	Delegated spokesperson on day-to-day operational or technical enquiries.
Manager Customer Experience	Responsible for delegating enquiries to employees outside of these roles where necessary.

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Communications Unit	Responsible for coordinating responses and providing information to the media on behalf of Council.
Senior Officer	Responsible for working with Communications Unit to approve any media and external communications strategies relevant to their departmental portfolio.
Staff	No media role unless requested to provide information or comment in the formulation of a media enquiry. From time-to-time staff may be chosen by the Communications Unit to feature in communications material as the subject matter expert.

5.3 Council Communication - Scope

5.3.1 Promoting Council business

The Communications Unit is responsible for developing, approving and implementing Council's media and external communications strategies with the relevant Senior Officer authorisation.

Council media and external communication strategies and resources will be used only to promote and disseminate the decisions, intentions, activities and actions of Council, and will not be used to promote individual Councillor or Officer views or agendas that are inconsistent with or contrary to those of Council.

State or Federal politicians will only be represented through Council's media and external communication strategies where necessary to reasonably inform the community of important news.

5.3.2 Media Relations

Council expects fair and balanced reporting, with an opportunity to represent Council's position on issues, and for media outlets to uphold the standards of the Australian Press Council.

The Communications Unit handles all media enquiries. Council staff are not permitted to be interviewed or provide a response to the media and must direct any enquiries to the Communications Unit.

Council will strive to maintain good working relationships with all media organisations including metropolitan and local print, radio, television and digital media. It will achieve this by providing clear, consistent and reliable information to the media in a timely manner,

- issuing regular media releases and holding media briefings with the Mayor and CEO;
- responding promptly to media questions and meeting mutually agreed deadlines;
- initiating, developing and implementing positive media strategies that inform the community about Council activities and services and enhance the reputation and image of Murrindindi Shire Council.

Councillors can participate in official media relations activities by suggesting ideas for stories and/or photo opportunities about Council achievements, innovations, programs, services or events to the Communications Unit.

All media responses will be prepared by the Communications Unit in collaboration with the relevant Senior Officer and approved by the relevant spokesperson e.g. Director, CEO and/or Mayor.

No part of an official Council media release/response can be altered or removed without the permission of the spokesperson who approved the release/response.

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If there are factual inaccuracies the CEO, in consultation with the relevant Senior Officer/Councillor will rectify the inaccuracy. Regular summaries of media coverage will be provided to Councillors and staff, including transcripts and videos as required

5.3.3 Cooperation with other agencies

Council will, from time to time, share opportunities (consultations/events) with our community from other government agencies that are of broad community interest/high community impact.

5.4 Council Communication – Out of scope

5.4.1 Councillors as candidates

Council's Media and External communications are not to be used by Councillors who are candidates in a Local, State or Federal Government election campaign.

5.4.2 Representing individuals

Council's Communications Unit will not be used to promote individual Councillor or Officer views or agendas that are inconsistent with or contrary to those of Council.

5.5 Communication Platforms and Media

Council will use multiple methods and platforms to ensure its messages reach the largest possible number of residents and accommodates a wide range of preferences for receiving Council's communications.

5.5.1 Traditional media

Traditional media are important mainstays for Council's communication across the Shire, particularly for those residents who do not use digital communication.

Traditional media currently used but not limited to:

- Radio
- Printed Newsletters
- Noticeboards (Council sites + community boards)
- Newspaper and community newsletter advertising
- Media releases
- Other printed material

All printed media produced for external distribution (except routine correspondence) must be approved by the relevant departmental manager and the Communications Unit before despatch.

Officers looking to produce printed media should do so whilst considering Council's Climate Change Policy.

5.5.2 Social Media

Social media is a valuable tool to help Council reach rapidly expanding online communities in a timely manner. Social media may enhance Council's ability to communicate with, and listen to, its community and enables fast and two-way information flow. Use of social media supplements and enhances traditional channels of communication.

Council will maintain a corporate social media presence, currently but not limited to:

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- Facebook
 - Murrindindi Shire Council
 - Discover Dindi
 - Murrindindi Shire Youth
 - Murrindindi Library Service
 - Murrindindi Children's Network

- Instagram
 - Discover Dindi
 - Murrindindi Shire Youth

- YouTube
 - Murrindindi Shire Council
 - Discover Dindi

- LinkedIn
 - Murrindindi Shire Council

Only officers authorised to do so can post on Council's social media pages. Council staff seeking to use social media for Council-related business should contact the Communications Unit for approval.

5.5.3 Conduct on Social Media Platforms

Council staff authorised to use social media on Council's behalf will

- be accurate, transparent, respectful and professional on social media, including to those who express criticisms
- discuss only publicly available information and won't post or comment on issues outside their work area/area of expertise
- not commit Council or Council staff to actions or undertakings without the express authority to do so
- be cautious in protecting their own privacy and the privacy of those with whom they are communicating
- ensure consistency with other sources of Council information
 - acknowledge and correct any errors or misleading information as soon as possible
 - get permission before uploading images or video of, or from, others on social media and ensure we attribute ownership of content appropriately
 - not suggest you represent Council when using social media for personal communication

5.5.4 General Use of Social Media by Councillors

Councillors might wish to use social media to promote their activities, and Council's work, to the communities within their wards. Given their public roles, Councillors:

- must have and use only an official 'councillor' social media account if they are commenting on Council matters. Councillor pages are the personal responsibility of the individual Councillor
- should be alert to the chance that any comment they make might be interpreted as a statement on behalf of Council. In addition to the standards and expectations set out elsewhere in this document, Councillors should ensure it is clear that the content or views they post or upload are their own and not those of the Council
- are encouraged to 'like' and 'share' Council pages and posts but in doing so, need to be conscious of the principles set out in this Policy
- should ensure they abide by the provisions of Council's Election Policy in using social media in the lead up to Council elections

5.5.5 Customer Service and Record Keeping

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Social media is another communication channel through which customer requests and feedback can be provided to Council. Staff must ensure information received on social media is processed and handled in accordance with policies and procedures relating to customer service, customer feedback and complaints and information management.

Councillors must forward to officers in a timely way any communication they receive by any means which requires information from, or action by, Council or which constitutes feedback for Council.

5.5.6 *Protection of Privacy and Reputation Online*

Council has a duty of care to ensure the privacy, and reputations of staff are protected. Council will not tolerate 'trolling' of Representatives of Council and will take action to protect staff from such behaviour. Instances of such behaviour online should be brought to the immediate attention of the Manager Customer Experience.

5.5.7 *Digital media*

Council's corporate website is the central hub of Council's diverse communication model. While Council uses many means to disseminate information, each of these must drive the community back to the website to seek information and access to our services. All information that appears via other media must also be on (or accessible via) the website. It is the responsibility of Directors, Managers, Coordinators and the local 'website champion' to ensure content pertaining to their area of responsibility is current and accurate.

Council will maintain and periodically upgrade its websites to ensure compliance with accessibility standards, and to ensure the website offers a user-friendly experience.

Council's online communication will seek to utilise dynamic content, in multiple formats (video, audio, pictorial) to enhance the accessibility of information and improve the understanding of important and complex information in the community.

Websites currently managed by Council, but not limited to:

- Murrindindi Shire Council Website
- Dindi in the loop
- Discover Dindi

Council will from time-to-time create sub-sites for specific purposes. Proposals to create new official websites for specific purposes must be discussed in advance with the Communications Unit to ensure consistency of style and branding.

Other digital media managed by Council, but not limited to:

- Electronic Direct Mail (EDM)
 - Flood Recovery eNews
 - Murrindindi Business eNews
 - Murrindindi Matters eNews
- Digital Noticeboards
 - Alexandra Library
 - Yea Library and Customer Service Centre
 - Kinglake Library and Customer Service Centre
 - Murrindindi Mobile Library Service

5.5.8 *Radio*

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Council hosts regular radio segments on community radio station UGFM Radio Murrindindi 106.9 Alexandra / Eildon, 88.9 Yea / Highlands, 98.5 Marysville, 98.9 Flowerdale, 94.5 Kinglake.

These segments are to be used to inform the community about Council decisions, policies, initiatives, activities, services and events and will be coordinated by the Communications Unit.

5.6 Individual Councillor websites and social media

Councillors are encouraged to utilise online channels and social media to engage with the community. To provide clarity for the public between 'individual' views and the 'official' view of Council, the following disclaimer should be displayed on any channel where a Councillor represents themselves as a Councillor: "These are my individual comments and opinions" (or similar).

Individual Councillors can have online, and social media channels included in their Councillor contact details (on Council's corporate website and individual Councillor stationery) if these channels are used only in their role as a Councillor and not for private or business purposes. On that basis Council's logo may be used with the above disclaimer displayed prominently.

Use of online and social media channels in the role of a Councillor should be consistent with the Code of Conduct and other relevant legislation and Council Policy.

Development, hosting, maintenance and monitoring is the responsibility of the individual Councillor; however, Officers can provide guidance and advice.

5.7 Emergency Communications

In line with Council's Municipal Emergency Management Plan, Council does not issue emergency warnings to the community. That is the role and responsibility of control agencies, including Bureau of Meteorology (BOM), Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES) and the Country Fire Authority (CFA) for fire related emergencies. Council relies on these agencies to assess real time data and issue warnings and advice to our communities

As lead agency for local relief and recovery, Council has a role in developing and disseminating relief and recovery information.

Murrindindi Shire Council understands the importance of timely, accurate and consistent public information before, during and after an emergency incident. As such the Murrindindi Shire Council's Communications Unit will work with the Emergency Management Team, Control Agencies and community to relay information to help minimise the impact to life and the community where possible and will utilise all communication channels available to distribute this information.

6. Related Policies, Strategies and Legislation

- *Local Government Act 2020* Local Government (General) Regulations 2015
- *Local Government (Governance and Integrity) Regulations 2020*
- *Local Government (Electoral) Regulations 2020*
- *Federal Government Disability Discrimination Act 1992*
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0
- Privacy Policy
- Equal Opportunity Policy
- Customer Service Policy
- Customer Complaints and Feedback Policy
- Councillor Code of Conduct
- Portfolio Councillor Policy
- Election Period Policy

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- Employee Code of Conduct
- Information Management Policy
- Climate Change Policy
- Generative Artificial Intelligence Policy
- Advocacy Policy
- Communication Strategy 2019
- Social Media Strategy 2020
- Municipal Emergency Management Plan

7. Council Plan

This Policy supports and underpins a range of strategies in the Council Plan 2021-2025, including the 'Our Promise' strategy to expand our communication and two-way engagement with the community.

8. Management and Review

The Manager Customer Experience is responsible for management of this Policy and for its review no later than August 2028.

9. Consultation

This Policy follows, and is informed by, consultation with staff and external stakeholders through the creation of Council's Communication Strategy and Social Media Strategy.

10. Human Rights Charter

This Policy has been developed with consideration of the requirements under the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

11. Gender Impact Assessment

This policy has been developed/reviewed with consideration of the criteria which inspires equality under the *Gender Equality Act 2020*.