



# **Cranbrook & Sissinghurst Parish Council**

## **Communication Strategy**

Adopted by Cranbrook & Sissinghurst Parish Council on: 12<sup>th</sup> October 2023

Next Review Due: 2026

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## 1. Our Communications Strategy

Communication is a vital part of running an organisation. Research shows that bodies who regularly communicate have a better reputation and satisfaction with service users than ones that don't. Communication allows the Council to both give out and receive information from a range of stakeholders with whom it regularly interacts. Especially within the context of a local council, speaking to the public and hearing back their views is fundamental to its function and purpose as a democratic body. Such communication should operate to professional standards and be consistent in its production, quality, relevance and frequency.

This Communications Strategy contains information on how to achieve the above standards and outlines answers to the key questions of how we should communicate, when we should communicate and to whom we should communicate. It gives direction on the production of online, print, traditional news media, internal and any other communication activity.

## 2. Communications Strategy in Context

This strategy outlines the Council's approach to communication with internal and external stakeholders, which is a crucial part of achieving the Council's objectives of transparency and accountability. Communication should be frequent, clear and disseminate relevant information to the right people, with the aim of informing residents and improving the reputation and image of the Council. It is designed to work within the relevant statutory requirements relating to local government publicity.

### 2.1 Vision

Our vision is that the people of Cranbrook and Sissinghurst have a clear understanding of Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council's priorities, operations and challenges and that they recognise the Council as a reputable and forward-looking council. It should be seen as an employer of choice and help to promote Cranbrook and Sissinghurst excellent places to live and visit.

### 2.2 Commitments

We will achieve this vision by communicating with the public we serve, the people we employ and the local authorities, groups and businesses we work with. This will be done by regular two-way communication with relevant stakeholders so that we both send and receive information through the appropriate channels of communication we use.

Stakeholders include:

- Residents and service users
- Local community groups
- Employees
- Partner bodies/organisations/authorities locally and nationally
- Business community
- Opinion formers and key influencers
- External funders

Channels of Communication include:

- Website
- Social Media
- Email

- Quarterly magazine
- Parish notice boards
- Consultations and surveys
- Public speaking at meetings
- Partner authority newsletters
- Local media and newspapers

### 3. Communication Principles

All Council communication should be consistent and uphold high standards of writing, production and dissemination. This reflects the culture at the Council and the aims and ambitions it has. Communication should encourage and enable a two-way flow of information, which involves listening to stakeholder's views and informing them of ours.

All communication will comply with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (2011) published by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Paragraph 4 states that communication should be:

- Lawful
- Cost-effective
- Objective
- Even-handed
- Appropriate
- Have regard for diversity, equity and inclusion
- Issues be dealt with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

Further to this, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations issues guidance in *PR and Communication in Local Government and Public Service* that recommends the following additional communication standards:

- **Accurate information.** All efforts should be made to ensure accuracy at the time of production. Updates and corrections should be made where errors have occurred.
- **Delivers key messages.** Information should relate to key policy and principles of the Council. It should primarily relate to council matters.
- **Accessible to all.** Channels should be mixed to cover diverse groups and their needs.
- **Plain language used.** Information should be clear and straight forward. Key points should be emphasised.
- **Appropriate timing.** Communication should happen in good time to allow others to react. It should be regular and be an ongoing process.
- **Appropriate quality of design and production.** Ideally to a professional standard
- **Appropriate branding used.** Make it clear who the information is coming from.
- **Review and evaluate.** Monitor all channels to see what is or is not successful. Seek to improve output, engagement and learn from poor practises to communicate better.
- **Feedback.** Include survey questions in questionnaires to gauge opinion on communication and reputation. Inform respondents what will be done with the feedback.

### 4. With Whom We Communicate

A stakeholder is a person, group or organisation that has an interest in the success of the Council or can be affected by the organisation's actions, objectives and policies. Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council

works with many employees, individuals, partner organisations and groups to achieve its vision for the local area. Stakeholders include:

#### 4.1 Internal Stakeholders

- Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council Staff
  - Office staff
  - Caretakers
- Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council Councillors

#### 4.2 External Stakeholders include:

- Residents who live in the parish of Cranbrook and Sissinghurst
- People or organisations that use the Council's services
  - Non-resident users of the cemetery, playgrounds, rubbish bins etc
- Visitors to Cranbrook and Sissinghurst
- Schools in Cranbrook and Sissinghurst
- User groups in the Village Hall
- Local Charities in the Parish
- Local and voluntary groups in the Parish
- The Council's partner organisations
- County, District and other local parish councils
  - Kent County Council and councillors
  - Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and councillors
- Constituency Member of Parliament
- Local business community in Cranbrook and Sissinghurst
- Business suppliers to Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council
- Regional media
- External funders that have given funds
- Auditors
- Funeral Directors and Stonemasons
- Contractors
  - Including Parish Warden, Grounds Maintenance, Cleaners

### 5. How We Communicate

A diverse range of channels will be used to communicate. Channels are defined as being the medium by which information is sent and received. Stakeholders have varying needs, and different stakeholders may require different channels.

Channels can be in the form of digital, social media, print and face to face.

#### 5.1 Digital and Telecommunications

- Website
  - Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council's website: [www.Cranbrook and Sissinghurstpc.co.uk](http://www.Cranbrook and Sissinghurstpc.co.uk)
  - This is an easily accessible platform that covers most of the Council's documents, operations, important dates/times and contact information
  - It is for the giving of information and one-way communication
- E-mail

- Members of staff and the Parish Councillors are accessible via e-mail to discuss an issue or find information about a policy or service
  - This is a two-way channel allowing for direct interaction with the public
  - E-mails are viewed daily
  - Mailchimp is used to send emails to residents who have signed up to receive 'Be in the know'
- Telephone
  - Members of staff and some Parish Councillors are accessible via landline to raise an issue or request information
  - This is a two-way channel allowing for direct conversation with the public
  - The Office landline is available within working hours. Out of hours enquiries should be left on the answering machine. Parish Councillor numbers can be contacted at appropriate hours during the week

## 5.2 Social Media

Cranbrook & Sissinghurst Parish Council has the following Social Media pages:

- Facebook
  - <https://www.facebook.com/CranbrookandSissinghurstPC>
- Twitter (now known as X)
  - @CranSissParish
- Instagram
  - <https://www.instagram.com/cranbrooksisssinghurstpc/>

See also Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council Social Media Policy.

## 5.3 Printed Publications

- The Cake – Quarterly Magazine
  - The magazine is printed and delivered to all homes every three months and contains relevant information from the Council.
  - This is a one-way channel that provides information to all residents, whether they are online or not. It has the broadest scope of all channels.
- Parish Notice Boards
  - These are located at various locations in Cranbrook and Sissinghurst and contain relevant information, such as public notice of meetings, local events and office hours
  - This is a one-way communication channel

## 5.4 Face to Face

- Public Speaking at Meetings
  - All meetings of the Parish Council and its committees are open to the public and there is a period set aside for parishioners to comment. Members of the Press are also welcome to attend. The agendas will be posted on noticeboards and on the parish council website.
  - At least two Full Council meetings per year will be held in Sissinghurst for the benefit of the residents of Sissinghurst.

- The Annual Meeting will be advertised in the Wealden Advertiser and notices posted in key places within the parish as well as being posted on noticeboards and the website. The Annual Meeting will be held at Sissinghurst every other year.
- This is a two-way channel that allows for direct communication and responses given in person. Note – no decisions can be made during these discussions
- Surgeries
  - Surgeries will be held monthly in the Addison Room. Once a quarter they will be held in Sissinghurst.
  - This is a two-way channel that allows for direct communication and responses given in person

## 5.5 Surveys and Consultations

- Surveys
  - Surveys are taken to get a snapshot of public or user group opinion on a range of issues, such as their experiences, concerns, likes and dislikes, Council reputation etc. This data then forms the basis of policy creation and action plans to ensure the proper running and functioning of the Council. It is also an important, large-scale listening exercise.
  - This is a one-way channel that allows those surveyed to give information to the Council.
  - They are held infrequently and help formulate documents such as the Parish Council Action Plan and Communications Strategy
- Consultations
  - Often held in conjunction with an exhibition, consultations allow for the public and partners to give their opinions, views and ideas to the Council on a specific issue under consideration. They can also help to support a grant funding proposal.
  - This is a one-way channel that allows those consulted to give information to the Council.

## 6. What We Communicate

One of the communication principles is the requirement of relevant information. Relevancy is determined by the needs of specific stakeholders. Information they may need to receive from us could include:

### 6.1 The Public and Local Groups

- Parish Council office opening hours and closures
- Staff changes and job opportunities
- How the Parish Council works
- Parish Council documents, such as completion of an audit
- Meeting times and dates
- Local events
- Who to contact about which service
- How to give feedback, such as raising an issue or complaint
- Contact information of the Parish Council, elected members and partner organisations
- What their roles and powers are
- Policy proposals
- Information on accessing and using Parish Council services and any changes to them
- Costs of using services where applicable
- How to access and apply for grants from the Parish Council

## 6.2 Partner Councils and Organisations

- Changes to services
- Contact information for the Parish Council office and councillors
- Planning application views and opinions
- Legally required notifications, such as Building Control Plan following a project
- Police reports and crime statistics
- School information

## 6.3 Regional and National Media

- Press releases of interesting and informative stories
- Advertise local events
- Interact with journalists on a breaking story affecting Cranbrook and Sissinghurst

## 6.4 The Decision to Communicate

Day to day Information arising from within Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council, such as office hours changes/closures, staff changes, meetings advertisements/cancellations, policy announcements, newsletter previews etc can be approved and uploaded at the discretion of the Clerk and Communications and Project Officer.

However, where an outside body asks to use our communications channels to distribute their own information or advertise an event to residents, this will need prior approval by Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council. Outside bodies include user groups, local groups, other councils or businesses. There is no immediate right for such information to be published and so prior permission is required. Any outside information should adhere to standards on clarity, usefulness and legality etc and should not disparage Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council.

In principle, approval for one channel will mean approval for all channels. However, a newsletter article must meet formatting requirements and so something approved for Facebook and the website may not necessarily be approved for the newsletter if those requirements aren't met.

## 6.5 Accessibility

From 2020, all local council websites should provide reasonable adjustments and adhere to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). This involves making the website accessible for people with a range of disabilities, such as with visual and auditory impairments. All future content uploaded should:

- Have a clear and readable font and text colour
- If an image, have descriptions for screen readers to read out
- Use Word documents primarily, but include the option for a PDF if possible
- Have statements directing users to contact the Council for versions they need

## 7. Who Communicates?

Everyone communicates at the Parish Council in some form and so an understanding and application of the communication principles is necessary to improve the flow of information and the overall reputation of the Council. The key people communicating are:



**Office Staff**

The Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, along with the Deputy Clerk will have regular interactions with the public, such as through e-mail, face to face, parish notice boards, the public speaking section at meetings, consultations and surveys. They will also communicate with partner councils, organisations and local groups and businesses. They have a responsibility to uphold the communication principles and standards and work with the Communications and Project Officer on delivery where required.

**Other Staff and Councillors**

Other representatives of the Council, when communicating with members of the public and other local groups through e-mail, phone calls or face to face, should uphold the communications principles and communicate in a clear, informative manner. They should help in so far as possible to resolve an issue or forward them on to the appropriate member of staff.

**8. Evaluation**

Evaluation of the communications strategy is a vital component in receiving feedback and driving improvement. This involves the monitoring and assessment of the overall strategy and individual channels of communication. They should comply with the Council's key priorities and communication principles, as well as achieving key strategic outcomes such as giving clear information or changing reader behaviour.

# Appendix 1: Communications Framework

The communications framework outlines how new information and content should be created at Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council and what should be considered when making it.

## **Who are we talking to?**

Consider who the relevant stakeholders are and what their specific requirements might be. Which channel will capture most of that audience and what information do they already know?

## **What are we saying?**

Information should be written in plain English. Fonts should be clear and the layout of information logical and clear to follow. Ideally, it should contain an image to capture attention, especially on social media. It should also include key pieces of information such as date, time, location, contact information, cost etc.

## **Why are we saying it?**

Part of planning is to consider why this information is being communicated. Is it designed just to inform the reader, to change their behaviour or to get feedback from them? Each option can require different considerations and be written differently.

What are the objectives of the message? It could be to 'help advertise and increase visitor numbers to event X' or 'get public opinion and feedback on policy Y'. Messages should be targeted to these aims and not contain unnecessary or irrelevant information.

Consider how it fits in with other activities at the Council as it could form part of a wider campaign.

## **What resources are available?**

Consider what resources are available to deliver the message. Will it require money be spent and how much? How long will it take to create and then for how long should it be promoted? Which members of staff could help? What skills are needed?

Make sure to evaluate communications and read the feedback at all points. What risks are involved? How will we know if it's been successful? What did we learn and how do we improve this next time?