



Administrative Report

To: Warden MacDonald and Members of Essex County Council

From: Darrel Laurendeau, Director, Information Technology Services; and,
Katherine Hebert, County Clerk

Date: Wednesday, January 15, 2025

Subject: Contact Council Email Distribution Group

Report #: 2025-0115-LLS-R01-KH DL

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to identify options for a consolidated communication method for members of the public to contact all of the Members of County Council with a single electronic communication.

Background

Currently, Members of County Council utilize their email addresses from their respective local municipalities, which are linked on the County's webpage in each Member's profile. The County's website does not have a form or a link that would allow a single email to be sent to all Members at one time. If a person were to email more than one Member of Council, re-typing, or copying and pasting the individual email addresses into a single email would be required. There is no distribution list that distributes the email to each Member of Council.

Discussion

Technical Options

The following discussion is based on the fundamental assumption that members of the public would continue to be able to contact a single Member of Council should they choose to do so.

The following are some technical options that could be employed to accommodate the need for members of the public to send a communication to all Members of Council at one time:

- 1) Status Quo** – Members of the Public are able to email any combination of Members of Council, by completing the recipient field of the email. There are security concerns, however, as 'senders' could intentionally, or mistakenly include malicious links or attachments in the email. Individual systems may or may not be able to detect potential links should they be included. Email recipients have to exercise caution when opening email, links, associated attachments.
- 2) Distribution List to Local Municipality Email Addresses** – This option will create an email that will be sent to a distribution list at the countyofessex.ca email that will email all Members of County Council to their local municipal email address. The list will be created and managed by the County's IT department. The list will contain the regular Members of County Council, the CAO and the County Clerk. There are security concerns for Distribution Lists, in addition to the security concerns in Option 1 above. Distribution lists, especially those that are public, are prime targets for threat actors as the number of potential targets in one email links to multiple emails therefore increasing the likelihood of success. Additionally, distribution lists with multiple domains, as in this example, increase the scale of a threat as eight (8) domains will be included in the distribution list. A successful threat attempt has the ability to compromise all eight domain environments. As part of this of this option, the County Clerk will be included in the distribution list for auditing purposes.
- 3) Distribution List to County of Essex Email Addresses** – In this option, an email distribution list will be set up similar to Option 2 above, but with the email going to all Members of County Council, the CAO and the County Clerk via their County email addresses. Security risks are reduced as the County email system will be the only one exposed to the emails from the distribution list. The distribution list, being public, will still be an attractive target for threat actors. Members of County Council will also be subject to participating in regular, mandatory anti-phishing and email security training, which is standard to all County email users.
- 4) Contact County Council - Website Form** – In this option the County would have a fillable contact form for members of the public to communicate with all Members of County Council. The form will allow for uploads of documents so that supplementary files and information can be attached as necessary. The "sender" will then receive a

verification email that their submission was sent successfully, will be scanned for viruses and circulated to County Council Members (as appropriate). The content of the submission will be scanned for potential threats, including, but not limited to, links, pictures, attachments, etc., and then a notification will be provided to Members of County Council, the CAO and the Clerk that a submission has been made. The Clerk will then review the submission to ensure any matter requiring the attention of County Administration is communicated through the proper channels, and that misdirected correspondence be addressed with the "sender" in a timely and helpful fashion. Should a response from County Council be required, the Warden will communicate the response. This option provides protection of all systems as the content is quarantined for review. Additionally, this process will prevent an illegal meeting or an accidental in-camera meeting from being created (which is a concern for Options 1, 2, and 3 above.)

- 5) Email the Clerk** – The final option is that the County Clerk is set up as the contact for email communications intended to be received by all of Council. The Clerk will review and communicate the correspondence and report it to Council and the CAO accordingly. With this option, the security concerns are present with the email being a vulnerability similar to Options 1, 2, and 3. It does, however, limit the exposure, with only one (1) person receiving the correspondence.

In creating these options, the practices of the other Upper Tier Municipalities were investigated and it was found that two (2) Upper Tier Municipalities have the option to contact the group as a whole. However, each of the two (2) handle how these emails are received from the public differently. It is our understanding that communications to the Council for Leeds & Grenville United Counties is sent to a "reception" email address, while communications to the Council of Lennox & Addington County is to the Clerk's email. The process of how the email is then handled for further communication is unknown.

Legislative Considerations

Since January 1, 2018, the *Municipal Act, 2001* has included the following definition of "meeting" under s. 238(1):

"meeting" means any regular, special or other meeting of a council, of a local board or of a committee of either of them, where:

(a) a quorum of members is present, and

(b) members discuss or otherwise deal with any matter in a way that materially advances the business or decision-making of the council, local board or committee.

Meetings conducted informally over email (phone, text or in-person), are subject to the open meetings rule. Members may be considered "present" when they come together electronically to discuss and advance the business of the County. Discussions are considered to be a meeting, if a quorum of members are present, and business or decision-making is materially advanced.

Members of County Council are subject to the By-laws, Policies and Code of Conduct for Council Members, and Members of Local Boards and thus are cognizant of the implications of conducting informal meetings of any kind.

Given the above, whether the status quo is maintained, or should Council select another option for communication of emails to Council as a whole, Council must be very careful in communicating with one another about the email, or replying back to the email.

All electronic means of communication have an inherent risk that enough Members of Council will be included in a communication to trigger quorum. Regardless of the communication method chosen, Members of Council should refrain from "replying all" and/or including additional Members of Council such that quorum would be reached. Finally, the Warden, as the head of Council, is the one who properly should reply to any emails to all of Council. The exception to this is if the Warden delegates a response to another member of Council or Administration.

Clerk & Records Management

In order to address the risks identified in this Report, it is recommended that the Clerk be part of any option, exclusive of Option 1 – Status Quo. The Clerk will monitor all correspondence to ensure that matters requiring intervention by County Administration are addressed, and that compliance with legislative obligations are met.

Email correspondence is considered an official corporate record. All records are subject to the retention periods and handling as set out in the Records Management Program policies and are filed within the County's Electronic Documents and Records Management (EDRM) system.

Further, any option other than Option 1 – Status Quo, will have implications under the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, ("**MFIPPA**"), should a request for records be received, and a search of emails be in order. Currently, members of County Council are receiving email at their local municipal email addresses, and those emails are not

within the control or custody of the County. As such, those emails are not subject to a records search initiated through the County, unless they are on a thread which includes an email recipient from the County domain.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications to execute any of the options listed in this report. Each of the options, with the exception of Option 1 – Status Quo, will require a component of County Administration’s time to set up, manage and review/maintain; including creating a form on the webpage.

Consultations

- Donald McArthur, Manager Communication and Organizational Development
- David Sundin, Director Legislative & Legal Services

Strategic Plan Alignment

Working as Team Essex County	Growing as Leaders in Public Service Excellence	Building a Regional Powerhouse
<input type="checkbox"/> Scaling Sustainable Services through Innovation <input type="checkbox"/> Focusing “Team Essex County” for Results <input type="checkbox"/> Advocating for Essex County’s Fair Share	<input type="checkbox"/> Being an Employer with Impact <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A Government Working for the People <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Promoting Transparency and Awareness	<input type="checkbox"/> Providing Reliable Infrastructure for Partners <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Dynamic and Thriving Communities Across the County <input type="checkbox"/> Harmonizing Action for Growth <input type="checkbox"/> Advancing Truth and Reconciliation

Recommendation

Option 4 – Contact County Council – Website Form as described above, is favoured as a solution that would satisfy the request of this Council, if it is determined that a change from the status quo is required.

That Essex County Council receive report number 2025-0115-LLS-R01-KHDL Contact Council Email Distribution Group as information and direct administration to implement the option of their choice.

Approvals

Respectfully Submitted,

Darrel Laurendeau

Darrel Laurendeau, Director, Information Technology Services

Concurred With,

Katherine Hebert

Katherine Hebert, County Clerk

Concurred With,

David Sundin

David Sundin, BA (Hons), LL.B., Director, Legislative and Legal Services/County Solicitor

Concurred With,

Sandra Zwiers

Sandra Zwiers, MAcc, CPA, CA, Chief Administrative Officer

Appendix	Title
Appendix A	What Other Municipalities are Doing for Group Emails