

Stoke Ferry Parish Council

Communications Protocol

Adopted October 2018; Next Review October 2021

(adopted from the Governance Toolkit for Parish & Town Councils)

INTRODUCTION

This policy aims to establish a protocol for effective communication of the Parish Council's activities and pertinent information to the media and members of the public.

The Parish Council is accountable to members of the public and has a duty to convey its decisions and actions through various media. All communication will be conveyed in an open and straightforward manner. The Parish Clerk is the Proper Officer of the Parish Council and is responsible for all formal communication between the Council, the press and members of the public.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Parish Council will facilitate community engagement with its electorate by:

- Publishing its meeting dates, times and venues
- Providing an allocated period of time for Public Participation in meetings
- Consulting with the electorate to gauge public opinion
- Maintaining an up to date website

METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

The Council will use the following media to communicate its activities:

ACTIVITY METHOD OF COMMUNICATION RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PARISH CLERK

- Approved minutes: Website
- Draft minutes: Website
- Agendas: Website / Noticeboards
- Council Policies/Procedures: Website
- Annual External Audit: Website
- Adopted Annual Accounts: Website
- Councillor vacancies: Website / Noticeboards / Local Magazine
- Financial information: Website

1. Parish Council Correspondence

1.1 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. This is because this is the most efficient and consistent way of responding to enquiries in line with the Stoke Ferry Parish Council's policies. This is also important to ensure that regulations relating to GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) is upheld and the Parish Clerk is custodian data processor when receiving correspondence from members of the public.

1.2 The Clerk should deal with all correspondence following a meeting.

1.3 No individual Councillor or Officer should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council, a Committee, sub-Committee or working party. Councillors and Officers do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know'.

1.4 All official correspondence (e.g. Parish Council responses to Planning Applications) should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letter headed paper or from the Parish Council's email address. Responses to correspondence received will be given with ten working days of receipt, where possible, if not an acknowledgement will be sent, and the letter will be discussed at the next Parish Council meeting.

NB: Correspondence that includes sensitive information relating to any persons will not be included on Parish Council's agenda and will be dealt with by the Clerk in consultation with the Chair or in their absence the Vice-Chair.

1.5 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).

1.6 Data of individuals such as name, address and email address will be deleted on all emails and communications before they are copied, shared or forwarded by the staff and Councillors in line with GDPR Regulations. Unless it is felt by the Clerk that an individual should be known to Councillors then they will seek permission from the individual to process their data for this purpose. an individual's data will never be shared with the public written or verbally.

1.6. Agendas for Parish Council meetings, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Parties

(i) Agendas should be clear and concise.

(ii) 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.

(iii) Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.

(iv) Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

PROTOCOL

1. The Parish Clerk is solely responsible for the preparation of notices of Parish Council meetings, agendas and minutes. These are always checked in draft with the Chair and if required the Vice Chair.

2. The Parish Clerk is responsible for the development and maintenance of the Parish Council's website so that it remains current.

3. All correspondence addressed to the Parish Council will be actioned by the Parish Clerk on behalf of the Parish Council in the local authorities name

4. Agendas for Parish Council meetings will be accompanied with sufficient information to enable Members to make an informed decision.

5. Agendas will be issued electronically so that they are received by Members at least 3 clear days before all meetings of the Parish Council.

6. Agendas and minutes for all meetings of the Council will be published on the Parish Council's website and within 'The Village Pump' at the next available publishing date after a meeting

7. Other relevant information will be emailed to Members in between meetings.

2. Communications with the Press and Public

2.1 The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the media, with the Chair of the Parish Council or Vice Chair in their absence.

2.2 Press reports from the council, its committees or working parties should be delivered by the Clerk or an officer or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.

2.3 Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Parish Council to speak to the media or with a member of the public on a particular topic, Councillors who are asked for comment by the press or discuss issues with the public, should firstly decline to comment and advise that as per this protocol they will discuss with the Clerk and Chair or Vice Chair in their absence

2.4 Unless a Councillor is certain that he/she is reporting the view of the Parish Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.

2.5 If Councillors receive a communication that is a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Parish Council's adopted complaints policy and be directed immediately to the Parish Clerk copied to the Chair and Vice Chair. Care should be taken in regard to personal details and the information received if on email should be only forwarded to the Clerk and Chair or Vice Chair and preferably deleted as soon as possible. .

2.6 The Parish Council's Aim is to communicate clearly and effectively both within the Parish Council and to the public. We will:

- always use the agreed Parish Council style;
- keep sentences short and paragraphs to 3 or 4 sentences;
- use active not passive verbs and sentences;
- use everyday words, avoiding jargon and acronyms;
- keep to plain English;
- always give the Clerk's contact details, e-mail address and website if applicable;
- always use the correct name of the Parish Council;
- Use standard templates for letters, reports and official publications.
- Address all correspondence being from the Stoke Ferry Parish Council in any form sent so it is clear that responses from the Parish Council never reflect personal views. The response would have been cleared with the Chair or Vice Chair in their absence, and the whole Stoke Ferry Parish Council depending on what is appropriate.

2.7. Communications received from the public will be communicated to all Parish Councillors preferably by email. The Clerk in consultation with the Chair will decide how best to take any matter forward and, if appropriate, to place on the agenda. Members of the public will be informed, via the parish Clerk, as to how their communication will be dealt with. The matter may be formally referred to a Committee, be placed on the agenda of the next meeting, responded to by the Clerk, or simply noted. There is no discussion at a Parish Council meeting on a matter for which there has been no prior notice. However, the Parish Council has arrangements for public questions, comments or representations in "Public Participation". This is limited to three minutes per person (unless agreed otherwise).

3. Councillor Correspondence to external parties

3.1 As the Clerk should be sending most of the Parish Council's correspondence from a Councillor to other bodies, it needs to be made clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Parish Council.

3.2 A copy of all outgoing correspondence relating to the Parish 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.

4. Communications with Parish Council Staff (Guidance for Councillors)

4.1 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 Parish Council).

4.2 No individual Councillor, regardless of whether they are the Chair of the Parish Council, the Chair of a Committee or other meeting, or are styled "Leader" of the Council, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with Parish Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.

4.3 Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the parish council but mainly the preferred way to correspond would be in writing either email or letter

4.4 E-mails:

- Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk;
- reasons for urgency should be stated;
- Information to Councillors should normally be directed via the Clerk;
- E-mails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk but avoided as much as possible.
- Councillors should acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

4.5 Meetings with the Clerk:

- Wherever possible an appointment should be made;
- Meetings should be relevant to the work of that officer;
- Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not matters driven by personal or political agendas.
- The meetings will be held in an agreed venue, not the Parish Clerk's home address.

5. Communications between Parish Councillors

5.1 The preferred mechanism for communication between Councillors must be the Parish Council meeting.

5.2 It is rare that a matter is so urgent that it needs immediate email discussion with the whole Parish Council. If a Councillor feels that there is something which needs to be shared with the whole Parish Council urgently he/ she should seek advice from the Clerk (or in her absence the Chair of the Council); the Clerk (or in her absence the Chair of the Council) will decide on the most appropriate course of action and disseminate the information to other Councillors as appropriate.

6. Social Media

6.1 If any Councillor uses social media they need to ensure that any communications are perceivable

in the best way possible to ensure that the Parish Council's reputation is upheld on any platform used.

6.2 The Parish Council, its staff or Councillors will not respond to social media in its official capacity, and will only consider communications made directly via email, phone or letter. This is because any form of Social Media will not be in connection with the Parish Council and therefore it holds no responsibility or accountability for the form of communication which it is used for.

6.3 Councillors will be able to publicise events using social media and other types of media which are necessary for publicity within the community, and if details have been previously agreed.

7. All communications are subject to the Code of Conduct

8. If necessary the Stoke Ferry Parish Council will consider using its Policy to deal with Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complainants.