

# Farnham and Stratford St Andrew Parish Council

## Communications Protocol

(adapted from the Governance Toolkit for Parish and Town Councils)

*This Protocol was approved on 9 June 2025. It was also agreed that the resurrection of social media be explored by the Clerk in order that the Council be able to better publicise its activities, items of importance to the electorate etc. Subject to the Clerk's recommendations, this Protocol may be amended.*

### Introduction

This document 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.

### **PROTOCOL (further detail provided below)**

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

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

All correspondence addressed to the Parish Council will be actioned by the Parish Clerk on behalf of the Parish Council and in the local authority's name.

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

Agenda will be issued electronically so that they are received by Members at least 3 clear working days before all meetings of the Parish Council. Other relevant information will be emailed to Members in between meetings.

Agenda and minutes for all meetings of the Council will be published on the Parish Council's website.

Minutes will be published on the Council's website at the earliest opportunity. The website will also be the main source of key governance documents for transparency and openness.

The Clerk, in consultation with the Chair, will be responsible for clearing all press reports or comments to the media. These will be delivered by the Clerk.

Councillors should ensure that in discussions with the media or the public they represent the Council's agreed corporate view or defer until that view has been agreed. Alternatively, Councillors should state that they are expressing their own views and not speaking on behalf of the Council.

All complaints will be dealt with in accordance with the Council's Procedure and Policy and referred to the Clerk only in the first instance.

Formal communications from the Parish Council will, wherever possible, use the agreed style.

The Clerk and Councillors if social media personally need to ensure that any communications are perceivable in the best way possible to ensure that the Parish Council's reputation (by association) is upheld on any platform used.

ALL communications by Councillors are subject to the Code of Conduct

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.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The Parish Council resurrects the use of social media account(s) on Facebook and X to publicise its activities, items of importance to the electorate etc.
2. If the above recommendation is agreed, the wording of this document to be revised to reflect that social media will also be used to engage and communicate.
3. The use of the existing WhatsApp Group to continue but care to be taken as the Council has no responsibility or accountability for the form of communication it is used for. Councillors need to ensure they are clear that views expressed are personal and to uphold the reputation of the Council.

## **Community engagement**

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

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

The Council will use the following media to communicate its activities on the matters required by the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities:

- Approved minutes: Website
- Draft minutes: Website

- Agendas: Website / Noticeboards
- Council Policies/Procedures: Website
- Annual Internal Audit: Website
- Adopted Annual Accounts: Website
- Councillor vacancies: Website / Noticeboards / Local newsletter
- Financial information: Website

## **Correspondence**

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 the most efficient and consistent way of responding to enquiries. This is also important to ensure that the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) are consistently upheld, and the Parish Clerk is the Council's designated custodian Data Processor when receiving correspondence from members of the public.

The Clerk should deal with all outgoing correspondence following a meeting on behalf of the Council.

All official correspondence (e.g. Parish Council responses to Planning Applications) should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the Council from the Clerk's email address and by logging in as Clerk to the District Council's online portal.

Responses to correspondence received will be given within ten working days of receipt, where possible, if not possible an acknowledgement will be sent. Depending on the complexity of the issue the letter may be discussed with the Chair/Vice Chair or at the next Parish Council meeting. Correspondence that includes sensitive information relating to any persons will not be included on Parish Council agenda.

Where correspondence from the Clerk is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person. However, email addresses should be blind copied (BCC) and not visible to all recipients.

Personal data of individuals such as name, address, email address etc. will be deleted on all emails and communications before they are copied, shared or forwarded by the Clerk and Councillors in line with GDPR Regulations. This data should only be retained for the purpose for which it was originally compiled and deleted once its purpose has been completed. Under GDPR, Councillors and the Clerk do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a valid '*need to know*' as stipulated in the Regulations.

If 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 in writing or verbally.

## **Agenda**

Agenda should be clear and concise. 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. Items for information should be kept to a minimum, come at the end of the meeting and be kept brief at the meeting. Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for “information only”, this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

### **Communications with the Press and Public**

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 Press reports from the Council should be delivered by the Clerk or via the reporter’s own attendance at a meeting.

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 to 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/Vice Chair.

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

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 Complaints Policy and be directed immediately to the Parish Clerk as Proper Officer. Care must be taken about personal details and the information received and an email only be forwarded to the Clerk. This should then be deleted by the Councillor as soon as possible.

6 The Parish Council’s aim is to communicate clearly and effectively both within the Parish Council and to the public. To do this we will:

- always use the agreed Parish Council style which is:
- 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 as being from the Parish Council in any form sent so it is clear responses are from the Parish Council, as a corporate body, and never reflect personal views. The response should have been cleared with the Chair or

Vice Chair in their absence, or the whole Parish Council depending on what is appropriate.

Communications received from the public will be communicated to all Parish Councillors preferably by email by the Clerk. The Clerk in consultation with the Chair will decide how best to take any matter forward and, if appropriate, to place on an 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 the Council, be placed on the agenda of the next meeting, responded to by the Clerk, or simply noted. There must not be discussion at a Parish Council meeting on any matter for which there has been no prior notice. However, the Parish Council has arrangements for public questions, comments or representations in a standing item at ordinary meetings. This will be time-limited unless agreed otherwise. If an item is raised without prior notice, a reply will not necessarily be given at the meeting but in writing later.

### **Councillor correspondence to external parties**

The Clerk should be sending most of the Parish Council's correspondence from a Councillor to other bodies, and will make it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the Parish Council. If this is not possible, 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 should be noted on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.

### **Communications with Parish Council Staff (Guidance for Councillors)**

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. The Clerk must not be asked to act in a manner which they know is not compliant with the law or regulations. Councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not matters driven by personal or political agenda.

Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the Parish Council but mainly the preferred way to correspond would be by email to ensure a record is held.

E-mails:

- Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk as this is a part-time role
- 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 whenever possible.
- Councillors should acknowledge receipt of their e-mails when requested to do so.

## **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 agenda.
- The meetings will be held in an agreed venue, not the Parish Clerk's home address.

## **Communications between Parish Councillors**

The preferred mechanism for communication between Councillors must be the Parish Council meeting. It is rare that a matter is so urgent that it needs immediate email discussion with the whole Parish Council. However, 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.

## **Social media and use of the Parish Council's website**

If any Councillor uses social media personally, 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.

The Parish Council, its staff or Councillors will not respond to social media comments in an official capacity, (rather state they are expressing a personal view) and will only consider communications official if made directly via email, telephone or letter. This is because any current form of social media will not be conducted in connection with the Parish Council and therefore it holds no responsibility or accountability for the form of communication which it is used for.

Councillors will be able to publicise events using their own social media for publicity within the community, if details have been previously agreed.

In the interests of transparency, promptness and, to publicise the work of the Parish Council to the wider world, the Clerk will add news items to the Parish Council's website. These can be provided by Councillors to the Clerk. The Clerk will seek the views of other Councillors, before publicising, if she thinks there may be objections to the content

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