



Stockton Heath Parish Council

Communications Policy

This policy is supplemental to, and does not in any way override, the Parish Council Standing Orders and/or Financial Regulations.

This policy was adopted by the full parish council at its meeting on 14 May 2024 (minute 24/015.2)

This policy will be reviewed annually.

1. Introduction

1.1 This policy sets out the ways in which Stockton Heath Parish Council will communicate information internally and externally and provide guidance to ensure the legality, efficiency and effectiveness of such communication.

1.2 A separate Press and Media Policy has been adopted by the parish council.

2. Scope

2.1 This policy applies to employees and all councillors of Stockton Heath Parish Council and has an effect on those who contact or access the services of Stockton Heath Parish Council.

3. Legislation

3.1 Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 and amendments applied by the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 – rights of press and public to attend meetings and make recordings of meetings.

3.2 Freedom of Information Act 2000 – right to request information from a public body.

3.3 Data Protection Act 2018 and Regulations – right for individuals to access information held about them by a public body.

3.4 The Equality Act 2010, which includes the Public Sector Equality Duty – providing protection for individuals, including those with protected characteristics and ensuring services are accessible to all.

4. Dissemination and Training

4.1 The council will issue this policy to all employees as part of their induction and the policy will be included in the Employee Handbook, available on the Parish Council website.

4.2 The council will issue this policy to all its councillors as part of their induction and the policy will be included in the Councillors Handbook.

4.3 For members of the public, volunteers and contractors the policy will be available on the council's website.

5. Monitoring and review

5.1 A review of the policy shall be undertaken annually; necessary amendments will be advised by the Parish Clerk and reported to the council for approval.

5.2 Changes in the law will be monitored and, if necessary, amendments/reviews made to the policy.

6. General Statement of Policy

6.1 Stockton Heath Parish Council aims to be open and transparent at all times.

6.2 Good communication will allow the council to better understand the needs of the community; build the community's trust and confidence in the council as a body which can represent the voice of

the community; and promote the flow of information between all those with an interest or influence in the community.

6.3 All communication from the council will be professional, timely and relevant; reflect the views of the council as a corporate body; not promote any political viewpoint; respect confidentiality; be lawful, with content reflecting human rights and equality laws.

7. Implementation

Stockton Heath Parish Council will apply the guidance below in order to fulfil the aims of the policy:

7.1 Procedures for Communication – Parish Clerk

7.1.1 The clerk is the point of contact for communications between the council and all its stakeholders.

7.1.2 All correspondence received which is relevant to the powers and duties of the council will be forwarded to councillors upon receipt if appropriate and reported in writing by the clerk at the monthly meeting.

7.1.3 Correspondence which requires timely attention will be actioned by the clerk, by report to the relevant committee or outside body. The sender will receive an acknowledgement of receipt of the correspondence within 5 days and be informed of any action taken or pending. The correspondence and action details will be reported at the next monthly meeting.

7.1.4 All correspondence issued by the clerk represents the council as a corporate body and is not the view of any individual. Official correspondence is indicated by the use of letter-headed paper or, if electronically delivered, by the use of the council's email address.

7.1.5 If information from a private individual sent directly to the clerk is to be subsequently shared with councillors, the permission of the individual will be sought.

7.2 Procedures for Communication - Councillors

7.2.1 Councillors, in carrying out their role, can expect to be approached by members of the community. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, email or letter. If necessary, guidance should be sought from the clerk in deciding how to deal with such approaches.

7.2.2 Councillors, in responding to queries, must be mindful not to make any statements which could be understood as binding on the council, but should state that the matter will be investigated by the council on behalf of the enquirer.

7.2.3 Where a councillor communicates directly with the enquirer, copies of correspondence should be forwarded to the clerk as soon as practicable, to ensure transparency and reporting at the monthly meeting. Where a councillor receives a communication addressed to the council, or which could be understood as being addressed to the council, this should be forwarded to the clerk.

7.2.4 Councillors must ensure that all communication on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of the council, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject.

7.2.5 Councillors should not enter into any communication with contractors or businesses where such communication could be understood to be a binding contract between the council and the addressee. All contractual correspondence should be forwarded to the clerk who will direct the matter to a committee or full council as appropriate.

7.2.6 If a councillor wishes to provide a personal viewpoint, they may do so provided that they emphasise that the statement is made in a personal capacity and the reporting of the statement must not be attributed in any way to the councillor's status as a member of the council. Guidance on using social media to communicate is given below (7.13).

7.2.7 Councillors must not send any official correspondence on letter headed paper or by council email address that has not been approved by the council, as such communication will be viewed as being an official statement of the whole council and must have whole council approval.

7.2.8 Councillors should be aware that, when corresponding by permanent means (email, letter, website, newsletter, noticeboards) such correspondence may need to be disclosed following a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or following a subject access request under the Data Protection Act 2018, under the General Data Protection Regulation, or in the course of legal proceedings.

7.3 Procedures for Communication - Others

7.3.1 All correspondence received will be acknowledged within 5 working days by the clerk.

7.3.2 All correspondence will be reported to the monthly meeting of the council if appropriate, with personal identifying details removed.

7.3.3 If any actions taken need to be communicated with the addressee, such communication will be sent as soon as practicable.

7.3.4 Correspondence that relates to a complaint about the council, its employees or councillors will be dealt with by the procedure outlined in the Complaints Policy.

7.4 Methods of communication - General

7.4.1 The council will maintain a telephone system which includes an answering machine; an email address; noticeboards and a website to allow information flow from councillors and external sources, members of the public, businesses offering goods and services that may benefit the council and its community, and other bodies such as Warrington Borough Council.

7.4.2 The council will publish and deliver a newsletter to all homes in the parish at least once per year.

7.4.3 The council will encourage public participation at all of its public meetings and the public and press are permitted to photograph, film, record or otherwise report at the meeting (which includes using a mobile phone or tablet, recording for a TV/radio broadcast, providing commentary on blogs, web forums, or social networking sites such as Twitter[X], Facebook and YouTube) to enable anyone not present to see, hear or be given commentary about the meeting, unless the meeting has resolved to hold all or part of the meeting without the public present, or such activities disrupt the proceedings. The council will provide reasonable facilities to allow filming.

Oral reporting or oral commentary on a meeting while it is taking place is not usually permitted as this would disrupt the meeting.

The photographing, recording, filming or other reporting of a child or vulnerable adult at a council or committee meeting is not permitted unless an accompanying or responsible adult has given permission.

Anyone present not wishing to be filmed will be offered seating out of range of any camera.

7.4.4 The council will seek opportunities to meet face-to-face with residents and others through the provision of an office; councillor surgeries; and hosting and attending events where there are opportunities for community engagement.

7.4.5 The council will maintain a social media presence, posting relevant information. Any comments received will not necessarily receive a response, as monitoring the account on a daily basis would be onerous. However, where appropriate a reply may be posted to advise residents to make direct contact via telephone or email.

7.4.6 The council will work with the press and media to disseminate information (the procedure can be found in the Press and Media Policy).

7.5 Telephone

7.5.1 The council office telephone will be answered during office hours and an answering machine will receive messages when no one is available or the office is closed. Messages will be checked each

day that the office is visited and calls returned promptly where a number has been left. Telephone calls received will be logged and reported at the monthly meeting, if appropriate

7.5.2 During any necessary prolonged periods where the office will not be visited, a call forwarding service will be used to divert calls to a number that is monitored for incoming calls.

7.6 Post

7.6.1 All post received will be opened promptly, date stamped and dealt with appropriately and reported to the monthly meeting.

7.6.2 During any necessary prolonged periods where the office will not be visited, a weekly collection of post items will be made where possible.

7.7 Noticeboard

7.7.1 The noticeboards are currently provided by the council – one at the Forge Shopping Precinct, London Road, one at Ackers Pit, Ackers Lane and one at Pilling Gardens, Hunts Lane.

7.7.2 The noticeboard at the Forge Shopping Centre is updated with the council's agendas and all legal notices. Councillor contact details and meeting dates are displayed and council events and information from third parties is displayed from time to time.

7.7.3 The noticeboard at Ackers Pit is shared with the Warrington Anglers' Association and displays councillor contact details and meeting dates. Information about Ackers Pit, council events and information from third parties is displayed from time to time.

7.7.4 The noticeboard at Pilling Gardens displays councillor contact details, meeting dates, council events and information from third parties from time to time.

7.8 Website

7.8.1 The council website is maintained and frequently updated to provide all information which the council has a legal duty to provide, as well as a range of information about the council, the parish and the wider community of Warrington.

7.8.2 Agendas and supporting papers for upcoming meetings are loaded in a timely manner and minutes of meetings are uploaded in draft form within two weeks of the meeting taking place, with the final approved version available on the second Friday of each month. An archive of minutes is available.

7.8.3 Financial information is available on a monthly basis through the publication of the schedule of payments appended to the Planning, Finance and General Purposes Committee minutes. The financial position of the council at the end of the financial year is made available through the publication of the Annual Governance and Accounting Report (AGAR) at the end of June. The budget proposal and justification of the precept request is also available.

7.8.3 The policies of the council are made available.

7.8.4 Contact details are listed and kept up-to-date.

7.8.5 The website is reviewed for accessibility and an accessibility statement is published which states the level of accessibility and future plans to address accessibility issues.

7.9 Newsletter

7.9.1 The council produces a minimum of one newsletter per civic year, which is delivered to every home in the parish and is available on the council's website. The newsletter provides an opportunity for the council to inform residents of items of interest and engage residents in the actions and decisions of the council.

7.10 Email

7.10.1 The council recognises the importance of email as a quick and efficient means of communicating and offers the following guidelines to be followed by employees, councillors and others when communicating using email:

7.10.2 Before communicating with email, consider if another method might be more appropriate, such as a face-to-face conversation or a telephone call, particularly if the content is of a sensitive or emotive nature.

7.10.3 When writing emails, take time and care; reread before you press send and consider that emails are a permanent form of communication that cannot be erased.

7.10.4 If forwarding emails to third parties, give careful consideration to details such as personal, sensitive or confidential information. Also consider information which may appear further down the email chain. Contact the originator of the email to check if and what details they give permission to be shared.

7.10.5 Try to avoid using the "Reply to all" function – consider who the relevant recipients of the correspondence are before replying.

7.10.6 Emails cannot be guaranteed as private and confidential as they may be subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or the Data Protection Act 2018. For this reason, consider the content of the email carefully before pressing send – it should be concise, courteous, relevant, be written under the assumption that it may be disclosed and therefore not reveal any sensitive, personal or confidential information to any of the recipients who do not need to have such information.

7.10.7 When dealing with emails, check regularly and deal with them promptly, acknowledging their receipt if the reply will not be in the immediate future (use an out of office message to indicate a prolonged delay due to absence). Do not unnecessarily store emails, but remember deleted emails are never permanently erased and can be retrieved if necessary.

7.11 In person

7.11.1 The council office is staffed at varying hours throughout the working week Councillors and residents are encouraged to make contact by email or telephone to request a time for attending the office.

7.11.2 Councillors and employees are directed to the procedures set out in the Lone Worker Policy for any face-to-face meetings where they will be alone with a member of the community.

7.11.3 The clerk should be informed of any meetings or face-to-face events that are significant to the council as a whole so that they can be reported at the monthly meeting of the council.

7.12 Social Media

7.12.1 The council now operates a social media presence through Facebook and Instagram. When appropriate, the clerk and assistant clerk also ask hosts of other social media sites to make a post on behalf of the council, usually to advertise an event or a vacancy. The following guidance is offered to those who may choose to communicate through social media (Facebook, Twitter [X], Instagram etc.):

7.12.2 As with all written communication, consideration of content and how it will be perceived by the intended and unintended recipients should be made when deciding on posting to social media sites. Like emails, posts cannot be permanently erased once the send button has been activated. Posts can be removed, but in the time interval between posting and removal, screenshots can be made and the post re-shared from the screenshot.

7.12.3 It should be clear to recipients that any views offered by councillors using their own social media accounts are their individual views and do not represent the collective view of the council.

7.12.4 Take care not to be drawn into online chat which leads to decision-making or promises of action on behalf of the council. Matters that require a council decision should be referred to the council either by the councillor themselves as a result of their interaction or by the councillor directing the social media correspondent to the appropriate communication channel for the council (email, telephone, post, face-to-face meeting or attendance at a public meeting).

7.12.5 The council will not take upon itself any action on behalf of an individual councillor if something posted is subject to legal challenge.

7.13 Press and Media

7.13.1 The council has adopted a Press and Media Policy which outlines the procedures to be followed when making an approach or when an approach is made for comment from the press and media.

7.13.2 The press and media have a legal right and are welcomed to attend all public meetings of the council and all such arrangements as are necessary to allow the taking of reports at such meetings shall be made, including the proactive sending of agendas and papers to those press and media that the clerk holds contact details for, and the sending of the same on request from any other press and media organisation.

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Lara Jacob		9 June 2020	20/030
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